

*Hebrew Testament: Exodus 14:19-31*  
*Gospel: Matthew 18:21-22*

*word count: 1,684*

Before I begin to talk about where we are today, let’s talk for a moment about where we were then, on the morning ten years ago today when we woke up to a world forever changed. I want to do something different, and ask you to respond, if you so choose. I will model this:

Carl woke me up early and very gently said, “You need to get up. Something terrible has happened and you need to know.” As I watched the unreal unfold on television, the calls started coming in from members of my congregation. “What time would the service be tonight?” I felt I was being called upon to make sense of the senseless. In a word, I felt inadequate.

What were your thoughts and feelings? How did you respond? And let me add a loaded question: the lectionary for this particular day shows us a Jesus who, when asked if someone should forgive as many as seven times, says, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Are those words about forgiveness possible to hear without flinching today?

*Time for discussion.*

I want to be fully mindful of this day. I have with me a piece the pinkish-gray granite from the World Trade Center that was given to me by a friend who lost someone dear to him that day.

I remember the following Sunday—it was September 16. Across the nation, we gathered in churches; grieving, angry, sad, lamenting people looking for a word of hope from heartbroken preachers. We were hungry for music from choir members whose eyes shone wet and full while they lifted notes of praise nonetheless, from their lofts—wherein resided alongside them a palpable and shared sorrow.

Two weeks later, I was in New York, and after visiting the still smoking site, I went to Central Park. It was the most beautiful autumn ever that year, which made it all the more surreal. People everywhere stopped to examine each flame-red maple or golden oak as if reminded that beauty still existed in spite of horror, and that life was indeed, precious beyond all telling.

We continued like this for a while, as a nation, until such time as we were enticed by the forces of our lesser natures from a golden autumn of compassion into a season of vengeance that continues to bankrupt us, even more than financially, today.

That our better natures and our worst instincts live side by side is borne out in the history of civilization, and even in how we hear our ancient texts, such as the one today from Exodus, where one reading might appear to depict a god of terrible partiality, if not vengeance. With what ears today do we hear a story of a pillar of fire and cloud by the sea that divided people by those whom God loved, and those who were swallowed up and killed?

The historicity of the story of the parting of the Red Sea is in question beyond the miraculous nature of it. Nowhere in the well-recorded history of the Egyptian people is there an inkling of the series of plagues listed in Exodus or the tumultuous escape of a Hebrew people.

It may be read as a story of triumphalism, of good over evil with the backing of God. But, that would do a disservice to everything we believe to be true about the very nature of the

Creative Force, the ground of all being.

Certainly, we know that the attack on our country and so many innocent people was justified by such a triumphalist and blasphemous idea of a god who takes sides with one people over another, condoning heartless violence of any kind.

There is an old Hasidic tale about this passage, which I quote here from author Albert C. Winn. According to a rabbi, the angels were rejoicing over the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea—playing their harps, singing and dancing. “Wait,” said one of them. “Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping!” They approached God and asked, “Why are you weeping when Israel has been delivered by your power?”<sup>1</sup>

“I am weeping,” said the Maker of the Universe, “for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore—somebody’s sons, somebody’s husbands, somebody’s fathers.”

The text from Exodus goes on to say that the face of God was present that day in the pillar of fire and cloud. That is a statement I can lift from this text and believe to be true. It is present in the very instincts that were aroused in every soul that stirred in sympathy and compassion on this day that we honor.

The face of God that appeared in the pillar of fire and cloud ten years ago could be recognized in the presence of first-responders, those who rushed up the stairs towards danger so that others could be evacuated.

The face of God emerged on those who searched for loved ones and reached out to those in mourning.

It shone in almost blinding radiance behind the fireman’s suit and police badge, beaming through the surgical mask and the scrubs, glowing on those in line to give blood.

There were sightings of the Imago Dei, the face of God, all over in those days; in the countenances of those who brought food to food banks and water and supplies to the workers who toiled amid the carnage to try and find the lost brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, husbands and wives. Like the presence of the Spirit, it was in many places at the same time—witnessed here in New York, there responding to an emergency on a field in Shanksville, and here again in the military fortress in Washington.

Many people, in their last moments, made phone calls in which they chose as final words, declarations of love and care, rather than fear and vengeance.

English playwright Charles Reade once said, “Not a day passes over the earth but men and women of no note do great deeds, speak great words, and suffer noble sorrows.

Today is a day to honor their memories by looking forward with hope to something better than the place in which we find ourselves today.

Not long after our better natures shone like the sun in care and compassion, we declared war on terror itself. Our leaders used false evidence and manipulated our nation’s fears. John Buchanan, editor of *The Christian Century*, put it this way: “After 9-11, the United States embarked on two wars that proved to be ill-considered and financially ruinous. It countenanced torture and secret rendition of prisoners. It allowed the degradation of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib.”

Considering the loss of human life, the families left behind, the great courage of that day and the compassion in the weeks and months after, it feels (at least to me) that we owe it to the memory of this day to change our course. To begin to heal the wounds amongst ourselves, to find (or be) the peacemakers that can help draw us together as a people across the boundaries that we ourselves have contributed to widening, and to send a message to those who represent us that we want the fights in the sandbox to stop.

There is no other way that we can heal and move forward. We have to want to be healed by being willing to heal each other, motivated by our better nature, in search of common good, or we will remain a Balkanized people. It is as if our very soul needs to be knit back together again in “forgivenesses” seventy times seven.

The greatest examples of what we are capable of being are in the stories of the people whose memory we honor today—those who perished, and those whose first and only thought was to put themselves into harm’s way to rescue others.

Writer Brian Doyle wrote about two people who perished that day. He said:

“A couple leaped from the south tower, hand in hand. They reached for each other and their hands met and they jumped.

“I try to whisper prayers for the sudden dead and the harrowed families of the dead and the screaming souls of the murderers but I keep coming back to his hand and her hand nestled in each other with such extraordinary ordinary succinct ancient naked stunning perfect simple ferocious love.

“Their hands reaching and joining are the most powerful prayer I can imagine, the most eloquent, the most graceful. It is everything that we are capable of against horror and loss and death. It is what makes me believe that we are not craven fools and charlatans to believe in God, to believe that human beings have greatness and holiness within them like seeds that open only under great fires, to believe that some unimaginable essence of who we are persists past the dissolution of what we were, to believe against such evil hourly evidence that love is why we are here.”<sup>2</sup>

I hope we can honor this day by reclaiming the sense of true grace and compassion that came so naturally in our first response to this terrible tragedy. May we have hope that honors those who were killed, for hope is the sole precondition for new and better experiences.

In a benediction, Bill Coffin wrote, “May God give you grace to remember that the world now is too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.”

The pain of the world will sear and break our hearts because we can no longer keep them closed. We've seen too much now. Ram Dass said that, “To some degree or other, we have surrendered into service and are willing to pay the price of compassion. But with it comes the joy of a single, caring act. With it comes the honor of participating in a generous process in which one rises each day and does what one can. With it comes the simple, singular grace of being an instrument of Love, in whatever form, to whatever end.”

Amen.

### ***Sermon Resources***

1. Albert C. Winn, *Journal for Preachers*, “A Way Out of No Way: Exodus 14:5–31”
2. Brian Doyle is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland in Oregon. He is the author of three collections of essays: *Credo*, *Saints Passionate & Peculiar*, and (with his father Jim Doyle) *Two Voices*. Doyle's essays have been reprinted in the *Best American Essays* anthologies for 1998 and 1999. I was influenced enough by an article by Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Christian Century*, Aug 30, 2011, to include mention of his name and article here.

**Scripture for Sunday, 9-11, 2011**

### **Exodus 14:19-31**

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

### **Matthew 18:21-22**

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

**Call to Worship** (Based on Psalm 122) Followed by:

*"Peace Be Still"* (place musical notation in the program.)

John: (*singing*) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.

**All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.**

Paul: On this day when we remember the events of ten years ago, let our hearts open in remembering the many selfless deeds of mercy and grace that were performed in order to be healing balms to a nation and a world in shock and despair. May those acts of goodness in the presence of evil remind us that relying on our better natures rather than demands for vengeance will be the only way to move with hope from this day and this place into our future.

**All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.**

Elizabeth: As we enter into this day aware of the growing turmoil around our globe, as well as acts of nature that have displaced people everywhere, let us pray for the many who are forgotten; unnamed families and children in the path of destruction who have done no wrong but will suffer and perhaps die.

**All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.**

Paul: Let us pray for all diplomats, ambassadors, world leaders, and all who continue to seek peaceful resolution to conflict. Let us pray for all those who serve in our military and for those who are called to assist them, the medical personnel and chaplains. Let us also pray for those who constantly work to advocate for peace and justice without the use of might or force.

**All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.**

Elizabeth: Let us pray for the agencies of compassion, which will continue to feed the hungry, bind up the wounded, and find shelter for the displaced. As we remember the events surrounding this particular day, let us carry with us the memories of those who died and those who lost loved ones. Let us honor them with hope for a better future for our children. Let us pray for all people everywhere who live in fear and for our own fear.

**All: (singing) Peace be still, peace be still, the storm rages, peace be still.**

*(This phrase may be repeated several times.)*