

**Message Delivered at Christ Church  
Sunday, September 11, 2011; 5:30 PM  
A Service of Hope and Remembrance  
TEXTS: Isaiah 25:6-9; Matthew 11:28-30  
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

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We probably all remember where we were that morning; what we were doing. It was a time when I took Tuesday as a Sabbath. The boys were off at school, and I was in the midst of one of the most mundane tasks possible--folding laundry in the bedroom. My wife had been at the YMCA. I heard her come in the house, and turn on the television. Bernadette never watches daytime TV; so when I heard the television come on--that's when I knew something was wrong.

We could each tell our tale; of regular, everyday things being interrupted. It's said that the world changed on that day. That's true, but I'm not sure we realized it at the time. That would come later. We just knew that something horrible had happened; something beyond what we thought possible; something so unbelievably sorrowful.

It would be untrue to say that our nation had never known suffering before September 11. But maybe because it was innocents who were the victims; or because we didn't really understand what was happening; or because we could watch the whole thing unfold on television...what happened was a pain that touched the entire nation; and even the world; and suffering became something not abstract, but very real. We could not say we were not touched. And ten years later, on a day as eerily clear as that day ten years ago, we are still not untouched. We can't skip through this day. It is still a wound, and will be for a long, long time.

It was Israel that taught the world about suffering. The Egyptians, in their sphinx-like quietude, seemed to keep their eyes closed to it. The Romans, mostly victorious for 800 years, were able to ignore it; and when it finally came upon them, it would take a Christian named Augustine to interpret it. The Greeks understood it on an individual level, and thereby gave us tragedy.

But it was Israel who gave voice to the world that an entire people could suffer. Genesis is the story of a family. But Exodus is where the story of the people Israel truly begins, and it begins with their suffering. That is the context for the great tale of deliverance. And though Israel would come to know moments of victory, a time would come when they would know suffering again; when they would look upon the city and lament at its sudden reversal; and would again need to be delivered.

And in that suffering, God would reveal through the prophetic word a couple things that the world would always need to know; and that maybe could not be revealed without suffering...

One is that even in the suffering, God promises to be present; which we know, because the Messiah born of Israel would take on a cross. For that is the truth of Good Friday--why there is a Gethsemane and Calvary--so that we know our God is in the places of not only joy, but pain; not only rejoicing, but sorrow; so that we know that even where there is suffering, there God is. If God is everywhere, then God's got to be there, too. So when the world seems to be crumbling, we are not left to our own devices. His shoulders are broad and arms outstretched, and that on the cross he bears the wounds of the world and gathers us in. "Comfort; comfort my people is what the Lord said through Isaiah." And at the cross, Jesus lived it.

And that if God can be found even in the dust, then there is the possibility of hope. I'm one of those persons who believes in progress. I think the world is a better place than it once was. There is more freedom; and more justice; and maybe even more love. But there's still a ways to go. The images from ten years ago, the violence and anger and hatred that still tears people apart, is witness to that.

But God gives us the gift of hope; and as the faithful, we grab onto it; we use the gift; we choose for the possibilities. God makes a promise that his word will not return empty, that there is no moment that cannot be redeemed, no darkness the light cannot pierce. Things that the world says are crazy, we believe can actually happen because of the mercy of God--that there can be peace, and righteousness, and transformation, and wholeness, and new life; that a time will come--if not in our lifetime, maybe in our children's lifetime--when, as Isaiah says, the lion will lie down with the lamb, and the children will play over the hole of the asp, and all will be as God intends it to be. Call us crazy, but that's our hope because of God, and because the faithful before us held this hope--that truth is revealed not in falling buildings and hands clenched in fists, but in a cross and arms outstretched to gather in the world; and that the truer story of humanity is not the evil which with which this day began, but the heroic and selfless service with which we responded; that it is not the hatred that created this day, but the unity which followed it.

We have, of course, no proof all this is possible. But we have never hoped for what can be proven. Hope that is seen is not hope, the Apostle writes the Romans. Instead, we hope for what some say is impossible, and do so without apology. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, says the writer of Hebrews. And so, by faith we commit to hope--hope that memories can be healed; days can be reclaimed; suffering be redeemed; peoples made whole; and that out of the ashes of death comes the new day of resurrection.

We remember the past; and we pray for those who grieve; and we comfort one another in our sorrow and honor those who lost their lives because of what happened this day. In a moment we'll gather at the table for solace and strength; to be comforted and sent forth. Before that, we'll be still for a bit to just say our prayers quietly; then we'll stand and pray for the world and our country; we'll pray for peace, and for the people of different faiths to find some way to get along; and at the end of worship tonight we'll sing our favorite prayer for our nation. Even though our alabaster cities are no longer undimmed by human tears, we will sing it--because to sing is a witness to hope; just to sing declares we are alive. And if there is a time to lay claim to the prophetic witness that suffering can be redeemed, today we do so; and if there is a day for the followers of Jesus to stand and hope, today is the day.

So because we are the faithful, that's what we do. We hold onto one another; help God wipe away some tears; look to the Good Shepherd; we give our best where we are to help God's kingdom come; we remember that light overcomes the darkness, and death is swallowed up forever, and life always wins.