

Galilee at the Beach, Virginia Beach, VA
July 6, 2008
The Rev. Dr. James B. Magness
Matthew 11:28-30

Almighty God, still our worries and quiet our minds. Help us to set aside our everyday concerns so that we might bring our whole selves to worship you this morning. Open our ears to hear your word, our mouths to praise you, and our hearts to be filled with your Spirit. Amen.

A classic horror novel is *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson. Many of you know this story of a doctor who drinks a potion he's concocted, that for a time turns him into Mr. Hyde, a self-centered monster. As the story goes, the good doctor finds that, the more he drinks the potion, the harder it becomes to banish Mr. Hyde from his life.

Someone once asked Robert Louis Stevenson where he found the model for the story's principal character. Mr. Stevenson replied, "I found it in my nature."

It seems Stevenson was one of those people who knew firsthand the meaning of the phrase, "I sometimes do the very things I hate."

On this Independence Day weekend I have been thinking I have been thinking about our national life, and the things done and left undone. I don't know what life was like for you immediately following the events of September 11, 2001. For me that time was, to say the least, very strange. At times I think that since 9/11 we've experienced a lifetime of chaos. We have been told that the way of life that has emerged since that time is the NEW NORMAL.

In September of 2001 I attended a conference in the Pentagon. The conference began on Tuesday morning September 11th. Just an hour after we began, I heard shouts in the outside hallway: "Evacuate the building." Shortly after 9:40 a.m. when we were being evacuated into the North Parking area near the Pentagon Athletic Center, what had just happened began to dawn upon us. Somewhere at around one hundred yards outside of the building people began turning around and pointing up into the air at a plume of smoke pouring out of the other side of the building. Perhaps it was because I had been trained in that way that it wasn't so much the plume of smoke that I first saw. What I saw was the look in the eyes of the people walking and running from the building. The look was fear. Throughout the next seven or eight hours while working alongside our splendid medical people to care for the seriously injured I saw that look of fear time and time again.

The terrorists created more than just a little chaos in our society: people were injured and killed; airplanes and buildings were reduced to piles of rubble. For a long while after that every time I heard an aircraft overhead I stopped what I was doing to look up and see where the plane was going and what it was doing. The death and destruction

that year at the Pentagon, in New York, and in a Pennsylvania field have caused a great deal of external physical chaos. However, the terrorists' intent was, and still is to cause more than the external physical chaos. They wanted to create internal spiritual chaos within each American citizen. When I saw the fear in the eyes of people that Tuesday morning I knew that if chaos could reign, terror would win.

In the aftermath of the terror, death and destruction we found ways to deal with our experience. Throughout the year as fellow citizens and people of faith we gathered to remember the dead, to commemorate our heroes, and to pray for the injured, some of whom still suffer in body, mind and spirit. We remembered, we commemorated and we prayed. As we carried out our acts of faith, bulldozers and cranes went about the business of clearing the external rubble from the landscape and rebuilding what could be rebuilt. A great deal of energy was devoted to assessing and repairing the physical damage to our country. Yet, what often went wanting was the need to assess the damage to our minds and spirits; damage to our souls.

We have been, and to a degree still are, in troubled times. Years ago in the late 1960s, when I was a young Navy enlisted man at a far-flung outpost in Vietnam I learned what engaging in acts of warfare did to my soul. I found that it mattered little whether you were on the giving or receiving end.

It was during that time when first I began to realize that when trouble comes, there is a source of help upon which I can always depend. Listen for a moment to one of my favorite trouble-time helps, from the Hebrew bible in 46th Psalm.

God is our refuge and strength,* a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,* and though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea;
Though its waters rage and foam,* and though the mountains tremble at its tumult.
The Lord of hosts is with us;* the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Sooner or later there comes a time for people of faith to begin to clear up the internal rubble of their lives. At the Pentagon the restoration of the site where the plane hit was called the Phoenix Site. As you will remember the phoenix is the mythical ancient Egyptian bird that arose from its own ashes out of a fire and was miraculously transformed into a creature of energetic youthfulness.

A little more than two months from today a public memorial site will be opened at the Pentagon. On September 11th this year, seven years from the date of the attack, this memorial will be opened to the public. Pentagon spokesman James Calvery describes it "...a solemn and almost sacred place..."¹

¹ "Public 9/11 Memorial At Pentagon Represents Security Challenges," Nick Miroff (The Virginian Pilot; June 21, 2008) p 10.

Though I haven't seen the memorial, people tell me that it is so neat and clean, it is as though there had never been a crash there – that it is hard to believe that at that site on that day 184 people lost their lives.

For many of us, there will always be rubble and debris at that site. For many of us something within our souls died on 9/11. That death will be a death that keeps on giving to us unless we change the focus of our lives. We really do need to rise from that rubble.

In our faith we have another name for this rising up from the rubble of life: It is called RESURRECTION. This is a time for resurrection; a time to rise up from the rubble. Through Jesus Christ God offers us resurrection, God's way of new life.

Every year on 9/11 Americans spend a lot of time watching video of the aircraft that crashed into buildings, of the people who died and the people who fled. Each year many of us experience a renewal of the fear we knew that September. For some fear is based in a specific event such as a plume of smoke or a television image. For others there is a general fear that their future has been lost, or even stolen. We need to be resurrected from our fear – whether that fear is centered upon the events of 9/11 or upon some other event in our lives. There is one sure remedy that can lead us to the resurrection we need: HOPE. The greatest---enemy---of---terror---and---fear is hope.

Listen again to the continuing words of the 46th Psalm.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,* the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be overthrown;* God shall help her at the break of day.

The nations make much ado, and the kingdoms are shaken;* God has spoken, and the earth shall melt away.

The lord of hosts is with us;* the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

These words give me what I need so I can confront the darkness that is in the depths of my being. Robert Louis Stephenson was correct in that the major evil we find in the landscape of life is inside our souls and not necessarily outside of ourselves.

As people of faith since 9/11 we have gathered together on many an occasion and expressed our shock and horror at what happened on that day – and in so doing professed to have come face-to-face with evil.

Those of us who are people of faith must recognize evil for what it is. During the years since 9/11 thousands upon thousands of faithful people have come to realize their utter reliance upon the love, mercy and compassion of God. Many have found a renewed source of strength as they confront the force of evil with their prayers. Certainly we pray for the continued reign of justice to right the wrongs that have been perpetuated upon our citizens.

Yet, at this juncture in life we are offered the opportunity to look within ourselves and to allow God's gift of hope to perform the work of resurrection WITHIN our lives; to allow God to clear the spiritual rubble from WITHIN our hearts. God wants us to have hope. Terror and fear have no chance to exist alongside God's gift of hope.

Many of you will remember the story Jesus told in the New Testament Bible book of Luke about the rich man and Lazarus.² As Jesus' good friend Lazarus lay dying Jesus was summoned by members of Lazarus' family to come quickly to keep the friend from dying. At the conclusion of the story after a miraculous healing attributed to Jesus, Jesus leaves us with some shocking words. Through Lazarus Jesus states that there are some people who will not become believers "... even if someone rises from the dead." Jesus wanted the people to know that raising his friend Lazarus from the dead would not give people the everlasting life for which they yearned. In these words Jesus pointed us to the day when Jesus would arise from death and the grave – the event that would truly give people the opportunity to have life.

Today we are offered the opportunity for resurrection to be the WAY of life. Today we are offered the opportunity to push the clutter of our lives away: death, anger, and fear. We are offered an opportunity to push these dark elements of our lives aside to make way for a new life in Christ's resurrection.

Many of you have in all likelihood come here this morning with a life cluttered by fear and hopelessness. You may be saying to yourselves, "Jay, it is not really that bad. My problems hardly matter when compared with the horror of 9/11."

In reality whatever your problems, they matter to God. As it is recorded in a New Testament Bible story, Jesus had been working and working with his followers trying to enlighten them on what it takes to be his disciples. Because of this work the disciples were physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausted. In that context Jesus issued this invitation to his ragtag band of fatigued followers:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.³

The civil rights movement in this country got a lot of momentum in 1955 when in Montgomery, Alabama, black people had decided that if they could not sit anywhere they wanted on a city bus, that they would not ride at all. In the midst of that boycott of the buses, there was an older woman known as Mother Pollard. She was one of the elders of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. When her pastor, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., suggested she go back to the buses because she was too old to keep walking, she told him, "I'm gonna walk just as long as everybody else walks. I'm gonna walk till it's over."

King marveled. "But aren't your feet tired?" he asked.

² Luke 16:19-31, *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1992.

³ Matthew 11:28-30, *Ibid*

To which she replied "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested."⁴

With Christ as our hope the darkness of terror, fear, or injustice will be replaced by the rest God can give to our souls. Alleluia

Some of you have come here this morning with tremendous burdens – burdens that you need to leave here. You do not need to take those burdens away from this place. As Jesus invited his disciples to lay their burdens upon him, I invite you to bow your heads with me as we pray for the mercy and strength of Christ to live within you.

Lord God, you are above all a God of compassion and healing; look upon us this morning with the love of a Father whose son took upon himself all of our sins and weaknesses, a Father who desires that we should have the abundant life. We ask that you look into our hearts and souls, and as we give our lives to the love and care of your Son, that you give us the healing known by Lazarus and the rest known by Mother Pollard. This we ask in the name of our Lord Jesus.

AMEN.

⁴ Leonard Pitts, "The Hawk Eye," (July 5, 2008)
<http://www.thehawkeye.com/column/N0003-bc-pitts-01-20-TMS-01-18-0755>,
Accessed July 5, 2008.