

Where was God on Tuesday?

Preached after the attack on the World Trade Center

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Introduction:

*We all remember where we were on September 11, 2001. As the world remembers the twentieth anniversary, we are confronted by the images over again. I know for some of you, this may also bring some unfortunate memories. This was a powerful sermon from **Paul L. Larsen - Christ the King Lutheran Church, New Brighton, MN** and he takes us to the American mind at the time.*

Why didn't God reach out his almighty hand and pluck those planes from the sky preventing this terrible tragedy?

That is how we would like God to act. We would like God to be like Superman rushing to the rescue; working for "Truth, justice and the American way." But that is not the God we encounter in the Scriptures. That is not the God we meet in Jesus. God is almighty and omnipotent, but out of love and grace, God has chosen to limit the use of that power. If that were not the case we would be mere puppets or pawns forced to do God's will and follow God's way. That isn't how God operates. Instead, we were created for a love relationship. God loves us unconditionally and wants us to return that love freely. Forced love isn't love at all. But there is a price to pay for that freedom. It allows each of us to make choices that are not in accordance with God's will, choices which are wrong, or, as in the case of these terrorist attacks, choices that are downright evil.

This is far from the first time that evil has reared its ugly head. Human history is filled with wars, holocausts, and ethnic cleansings. Terrorism is nothing new. It is just that this act of terrorism was the biggest we have ever witnessed.

Elie Weisel, was imprisoned at both Buchenwald and Auschwitz during World War II simply because he was Jewish. He was just a boy when his parents perished in those concentration camps. He writes about the time when the Nazis marched everyone out of their barracks into the courtyard to witness an execution. An 11-year-old boy has stolen a crust of bread and as a lesson to the rest of the prisoners they sentenced the child to death by hanging. When the trapdoor opened, and the boy dropped to the end of the rope he did not weigh enough so that the fall broke his neck. Instead, his body twisted and jerked and flailed in the air as he slowly strangled to death. As this horror was going on a man ahead of Wiesel cried out, "Where is God? Where is God?" Another man replied, "God is there hanging on those gallows."

We may wonder where God is or where God was. We may feel forsaken and abandoned, even as Jesus did as he suffered there on the cross. But God is with us. God is with us even when we fail to feel God's presence. The author of Psalm 139 says, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

Where was God? God was there with that child hanging on the gallows. God was there with the people suffering and dying in the World Trade Centre. God was there on those planes with the people who crashed to their deaths. God is here with us right now and has promised to always be with us. God has not promised to make all things go well, but has promised that no matter how things go, that God will go with us. Jesus has said, "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age."

In the national memorial building on the Murrah Building site in Oklahoma City, 168 empty chairs are placed in the location where each person sat when he or she died in that terrorist bombing. Beyond that memorial and across another street is a statue constructed by St. Joseph's Catholic Church. The statue's powerful image represents a tall, white-robed Christ. He stands with his back to the busy street and the place where the federal building once stood. The representation of Christ faces a brick wall in which there are 168 holes - 168 empty spaces - one space for each person who died. With bowed head Jesus faces that symbol of loss, covers his face with one hand, and weeps.

In whatever suffering we know, in whatever "Where was God?" we ask, we cannot forget one important truth: God is here. Jesus Christ is with us and weeps with us.

Because Christ is with us we have God's peace which passes all understanding. Throughout the Scriptures we hear God and Jesus saying over and over again, "Fear not." "Do not be afraid." We are called to cast our anxieties on God and trust in God's loving care.

The love of God which can change us and transform us. It can empower us to be people who seek to change the world. Christ calls us to be people who use the gifts, talents and treasures we have been given to make the world a better place.

During World War II a church was bombed and almost totally destroyed. The statue of Christ with arms outstretched was still standing and mostly in tact. The only thing wrong with it is the hands of Jesus are missing. Today you can visit that church and see that same statue with a plaque under it which reads, "My only hands are your hands."

Jesus needs our hands. Jesus needs us to help the world to know that God is here. God has not abandoned us, but God is with us, helping us, guiding us and strengthening us for the days ahead.

If there is going to be peace, Jesus needs our hands to shape that peace.

If there is going to be justice in the world, God needs us to give a hand and make that happen.

If there is going to be an end to the hatred, which is source of this sad tragedy we have, experienced, then we need to be instruments of love.

A daughter complained to her father about how hard things were for her. "As soon as I solve one problem," she said, "another one comes up. I'm tired of struggling." Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen where he filled three pots with water and brought them to a boil. In one he placed carrots, in the second, eggs, and in the last, coffee. He let them sit and boil, without saying a word. The daughter impatiently waited, wondering what he was doing. After a while, he went over and fished out the carrots and placed them in a bowl. He pulled the eggs out and placed them a bowl. He poured the coffee into a cup. Turning to her he asked, "Darling, what do you see?" "Carrots, eggs, and coffee," she replied. He asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it, she observed that it was hard-boiled. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. She smiled, as she tasted its rich flavour. She asked, "What does it mean, Father?" He explained that each of them had faced the same adversity boiling water - but each reacted differently.

- The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak.

- The egg was fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside hardened.
- The coffee was unique, however. By being in the boiling water, it changed the water. He asked his daughter, "When adversity knocks on your door, which are you?"

Adversity has knocked at the door of America. It has knocked at our door and we need to ask ourselves how we will respond.

- Will we turn soft, mushie and useless?
- Will we become hard-boiled and bitter?
- Or will we be what helps to change the world? Jesus changed the world through his love. He loved so much that he laid down his life so that we might be saved.

We have seen that reflections of that kind of love in several situations during this terrible tragedy. Hundreds of firefighters and dozens of police officers laid down their lives as they tried to help rescue the people in the World Trade Centre. A Minnesota man was likely among those responsible for thwarting the terrorists attempt to attack the White House. Tom Burnett Jr. called his wife and told her; his plane had been hijacked. She told him that two planes had been crashed into the World Trade Centre. Then they hung up. He called back in a few minutes saying, "I know we're all going to die - there's three of us who are going to do something about it." Speculation is that they managed to overpower the hijackers and crash the plane into the ground. They lost their own lives but saved the lives of those in the White House.

We may not have the opportunity for that kind of heroism, but we can choose to be people who are like coffee in the boiling waters of this adversity.

- Now is not the time to go soft, wring our hands and say that there is nothing we can do.
- Now is not the time to become hard boiled and hateful seeking revenge and reacting poorly to people of Arab descent. The true Muslim faith deplores the murder of innocent people as much as Christianity does.
- Now is the time to do something positive.

First and foremost, we can pray. We can pray for those who have lost loved ones, for those who are injured, for those who are working tirelessly in the rescue effort, for those who are afraid, for the children of the world. We can pray for peace. We can even pray for our enemies. Those who hate this much are to be pitied and need prayer more than anyone.

We can also give. Perhaps we may not need to give money, but we can support our government as it seeks to aid the Americans. We can give a listening ear to those who need to talk about their loss, their fears and their pain.

We can also respond by working for peace. The old song says, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." We can be more peaceful people in the way we relate to our family, our friends, our neighbours, our co-workers, to people we encounter on the highways, in stores and on the street.

Love has the power to change the world. The love of Jesus has changed this world in a dramatic way. In his love he overcame sin, death and the power of the devil. Jesus has promised us that nothing in all of creation can separate us from that love. We are called to share that love with the world. We are called to be the hands of Jesus. And if we do we will let people know where God is. God is here. God is with you and me and with all people in this world. God will raise us up on eagles' wings, so that we can run and not be weary, so

that we can walk and not faint. God will give us the strength we need to do what we can to be instruments of peace and help change the world.

The beautiful and familiar Prayer of St. Francis says,

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, let me sow pardon,
Where there is doubt, let me sow faith,
Where there is error, let me sow truth,
Where there is despair, let me sow hope,
Where there is darkness, let me sow light,
and where there is sadness, let me sow joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not
so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

AMEN