

“Seeing beyond doom: 15 years after 9/11”
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Take a moment to let this set in: this year we have a freshman class of high school students who never experienced the attacks on September 11th. They weren't even born yet. You know, I don't usually feel old. In fact, I typically have the opposite problem—if I hear that I look like I'm 12 one more time, well, I'm just gonna slam my door and refuse to come down for dinner! But *this* makes me feel old. Of course, being merciful as I am, I won't tell you how old I was when Sept. 11 happened, because I don't want to make *you* feel old.

It's been 15 years since 19 men trained by al-Qaeda hijacked four airplanes and smashed them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing nearly 3,000 people, more than 400 of them first responders. It's been 15 years since that fateful day launched the United States into two wars, costing the lives of approximately 7,000 US soldiers and another 43,000 allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In that time, more than 2 million children have had a parent go off to war. It's been 15 years of elected officials failing to take care of the health, psychological, and employment needs of first responders and veterans. It's been 15 years of terrorism, anti-Muslim hate crimes, and an increasingly polarized nation.

It's been 15 years of fear.

[Wow... this sermon's off to a great, positive start! So... who feels like a picnic!?!]

You know, I've read that in Los Angeles, the city of angels, there are days when the smog is so thick that you can't see anything but what's right in front of you.

And what's right in front of Jeremiah, in this passage we read this morning, is a burning city, God's city, Jerusalem. Through the fog of his tears, Jeremiah sees only death and exile for his people at the hands of an invading enemy, Babylon. And through those clouds, he imagines mighty engines of war speeding through the sky swifter than eagles, laying cities in ruin. “Because of this,” Jeremiah writes, “the earth shall mourn, and the heavens grow black.”

I think a lot of us felt this way on September 11th. That image of those two towers burning, falling—it's etched on our minds. Struggling to see through the blinding dust of rubble, we wondered: Can anything good come after such evil? Can I ever feel anything again other than this pain and rage?

Maybe there have been other moments like that for you—the tears and the fear pushing out of you like a train that can't be stopped, pushing and pushing till you break.

And if you listen again to Jeremiah's words, you can hear God breaking too.

When you love someone completely, as God loves us, you open yourself up to the possibility of incredible pain. It is that pain we hear in our Jeremiah text—the pain and anger of a parent watching their child destroy themselves.

And into all of that, Paul tells us in 1 Timothy, walks Jesus Christ, who endures the same violence and feels the same despair, even to the point of crying out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This is part of the good news. And it's a weird part. We don't usually think of God's suffering and anger as something to be thankful for. But it is indeed good news to know that we are not alone, that the Creator of all things shouts and cries and bangs their fist with ours. It is good news to know that, in our raw moments of pain, God does not silence our anger, but stands with us before the world, shouting, “Burn it all!”

How many of us did not feel the same rage, the same despair, the same desire for vengeance after 9/11?

God validates those feelings.

But you know, here's the thing about that smog in Los Angeles. It can be overpowering, and for a time, you can think there's nothing beyond that smog, that this is just now your life, your world. But when that smog lifts, on a really clear day, you can see those beautiful mountains on the horizon. You can see that there is so much more to the world, and to life, than what's right in front of you.

Author Anna Olson writes: “On the days when you can see them, it is impossible to believe that the mountains have ever been invisible. On the days when they are obscured, it is equally impossible to believe that they even exist.”

And you know, I think hope is a lot like that. There are days when you can't believe it exists, you hurt so badly. But then you get a glimpse, and it's hard to know how you didn't see it before.

We get a glimpse of it in Jeremiah. To be honest, I overlooked it the first time. Didn't even notice it—it's so inconspicuous, so out of character with the rest of the passage. But there it is, in verse 27, when God whispers, “Yet, I will not make a full end.” It is, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “one soft note of grace” amid terror and anger.

But where we really see that grace is in 1 Timothy.

Paul¹ says that for awhile all he knew was sin and violence. This is the man, once named Saul, who persecuted the early church.

But then something happened, he says. While he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, Jesus Christ appeared to him and revealed just how little he had been able to see of the world around him. It was for Paul the moment of grace that set him free to show similar compassion to those whom he once hated.

He knows he didn't deserve forgiveness, but Christ, he says, forgave him anyway, as a sign of just how much stronger God's mercy and love are than God's anger.

At first, it seems like the angry God described by Jeremiah and the merciful God described by Paul can't possibly be the same God. But then we realize that we're just hearing from God at different points in God's, and our, journey through grief.

Grief includes anger and despair, but such is not, in the words of the prophet, the end. There is so much more waiting for us.

Yes, Jesus Christ cried out from the cross, and experienced the same rage and pain, but he walks through it, beyond it, in resurrection, a sign of the love that will triumph and the life that awaits.

We've gotten glimpses of it too in the last 15 years: moments of laughter and family, of friends and picnics. We've even seen justice and goodness prevail on occasion.

But it's in church, where we gather in peaceful community to worship and be fed by God, that we really see it.

On the first Sunday after 9/11, just five days after the towers went down, the people of New York City gathered at Riverside Church for an interfaith service of healing. Muslims worshiped alongside Christians, Jews alongside Hindus. A pastor spoke, but so did two Muslim imams, a Jewish rabbi, and a Buddhist minister. The people that day heard prayers in Arabic, Hebrew, English, and Japanese.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein's words especially rang out: "God cannot have sent us this terror. But we can see that God has given us a world that is a very narrow, precarious bridge—so narrow, so precarious, that one would logically... fear falling into the abyss and simply choose not to cross the bridge. But we must not fear to cross. We must believe that this bridge of life becomes ever

¹ Actually, the author of 1 Timothy is most likely a student of Paul's writing in Paul's voice, a common and acceptable practice in that day.

wider and safer when thousands of us gather, across all the lines and definitions that divide us, to become the agents of God's goodness."

So here it is, the hope upon which all hangs: In Jesus Christ, God made the decision we could not. We answered 9/11 with war and fear—fear of others who look and speak and believe differently. God answered with Jesus Christ, with the self-sacrifice of love. God took all of our suffering into God's self and churned out compassion and community and life.

And as the recipients of that amazing, inexplicable gift, we too are invited, when we're ready, to see beyond doom, beyond death itself... to embrace compassion and to see, when the skies clear, that the cross is empty and the stone rolled away. Remember September 11th, but don't get stuck there. Be a people who see beyond. **Amen.**