

Dare We Hope Again?
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Psalm 33: 12-22 (NIV)

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance. From heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth – he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do. No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you.

Through out this week we have watched on television or heard on radio stories of women and men who lost their lives on September 11, 2001; at the Twin Towers in New York, at the Pentagon, and on United Flight #93 that crashed in Pennsylvania. I imagine that everyone in this room remembers where you were when you first heard the news of terrorist attacks. I was rounding the northwest curve on I 475 in Toledo on my way to my church office. We have seen the airplanes crashing into the towers again and again. We have listened to the stories of those who managed to escape, the incredible pain that loved ones suffered with the deaths

of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents, lovers, and friends. First responders recall the challenge of saving the lives of others at great peril to their own. We are still humbled by the sacrifices made by firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, nurses, and ordinary people like you and me. There were 418 first responders who lost their lives from the New York Fire Department, New York Police Departments, Port Authority Police Officers, and Emergency Medical Technicians. And what of the unspeakable grief for those who never came home, whose bodies have never been recovered? They represent 40% of those who died.

Perhaps, like me, you have wondered if some new terror will rain down on America this weekend. For ten years we have heightened security at airports and courthouses waiting for the next shoe bomber, or underwear bomber, deranged psychiatrist, or someone who is really teed off with the IRS and flies a light airplane into an office building. Homeland Security has chosen Kansas State University as the site for a Level 4 BioLab to research potential biological and agroterrorism. The threat is to our food crops, grains for farm animals, and water supplies. Grain co-ops in

Kansas and elsewhere are now required to know where every load of grain originated from and follow strict lockdown and security measures at the close of each day.

It was Osama bin Laden's express written directive that Al Qaeda should make America suffer on this tenth anniversary. That threat has been echoed this week by his successor, Ayman al Zawahiri.

And if all of this were not enough, the stock market fell 304 points on Friday.

My question this morning is how we truly remember, how we memorialize September 11th in our souls. How would the fallen of 9/11 hope that we would carry on as a nation? I fear that there is a great rendering of the American soul that is doing greater damage than the killing on that day.

Clearly, these are real physical threats to our lives. A decade of terrorism, ever changing color-coded security alerts, pat downs and x-rays has jaded the American soul. I believe that under such threat the nation suffers a moral paralysis. Following September 11th the United States assumed that we would fight terrorism at any cost and by any means, without ethical reflections on our armed

responses to suspected enemies. Many political leaders refused any conversations about the methods that we might use to combat terrorism including water-boarding and the profiling of persons on the basis of their religion, ethnicity, or nationality. “Whatever it takes” became the mantra of our response to terrorism as if there were no moral boundaries. My concern here is the loss of public discourse on matters of human value, dignity, and the just means by which we engage a new enemy. Sadly, the Christian church has, by and large, kept silent about these and other difficult questions.

When the human conscience is shriveled our likeness to God is depleted. It is our capacity for moral agency that makes us in the image of God and without it our faculty for the nobility of truth is diminished. When we can no longer discern the justice and righteousness of human relationships we can no longer see the face of God and rush across the moors of life like armed madmen.

With the narrowing of our moral vision our hearts are becoming hardened with suspicion and contempt for “the other.” You know “the other.” The “other” is our neighbor from Lebanon or Afghanistan; the dark-eyed man with a strange accent; the woman wearing a hijab; the Hispanic kid who sits next to our

daughter at school; the Jew or Muslim or Hindu; the Republican or Democrat. The “other” is found among America’s poor who are further marginalized in joblessness, homelessness, and hunger. The “other” is the immigrant who wants nothing more than a way to provide for his or her family. The “other” is the growing community of Muslims who are alienated by radicals on the extreme sides of politics and religion. Some politicians are demanding that we enact legislation against Sharia law, as if that was the most pressing constitutional issue in these United States.

After a few months of national unity immediately following the terrorist attacks we have spiraled down into a country of poisonous politics with an inability to discover the common ground. The term “common good” is seldom, if ever, heard in the halls of congress or in the national media. The vitriol in Washington D.C. is so thick and sour that Congress is ineffective. American’s approval of the House and Senate is at a record low of 14%.

We have become increasingly tribal in a winner take all culture. Our television programs reflect the depravity of our mental and social ghettos. “The Bachelor Pad” and “Survivors”

come to mind where people are voted out of communities for no other reason self-preservation. ABC will debut a new program this fall entitled “Revenge.” Really? Is this the kind of society that we project to our children and families across the globe? Are these the images of self and community that we call entertainment? Is this what we call “reality?” Is this the legacy of 9/11? I doubt that a single firefighter, accountant, or cook who lost their lives ten years ago would dream of this kind of America.

With all of this and more, I ask the question, “Dare we hope again?” The answer is yes. We can hope again if we dare place our hope in the right kind of power. In the reading this morning the Psalmist clearly stated that the future of any nation is not guaranteed by its armed might. Large and powerful armies, combat chariots, mighty steeds will not save a nation – any nation. The future security of the United States will not ultimately rest in nuclear submarines, bombers, drones, humvees, surface to air missiles, or Special Forces. No of these will save us, declared the Psalmist. Size and technology do not matter.

The future of our nation, and every other nation on the face of the earth, rests in the unfailing love of God. Now before you shut

your brain down, do not imagine that I am just throwing up the name of God and hope that it will stick like spaghetti on the wall. I am not offering a Pollyanna faith that hopes that we can evoke the name of God and all will be right with the world.

If you read the Bible carefully you can only come to one conclusion. God is active in human history and we are the agents of God. There are common sacred principles that can be found throughout the religions of the world and each of us is the emissary of those values that honor the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is expressed in one way or another in the scriptures of the world’s religion.

If you think the unfailing love of God just falls out of the sky, I am afraid that you do not know much about God. That is not faith. It is superstition that allows us to be irresponsible.

One of the most fundamental and radical gifts that the Jews gave to us is the recognition that God did not stay on Mt. Sinai. Most ancient religions thought that their gods were local gods. But after Yahweh and Moses closed the deal on the Ten Commandments and filed them at the County Courthouse, the

Master of the Universe leaves Sinai. The Creator goes with the Jews first to the Promised Land and on to Jerusalem. God goes with the Jews into Exile in Babylon and even into the Diaspora. God is with the community of faith wherever it goes. God is with us!

The unfailing love of God is carried from place to place, nation to world, city to village, cathedral to country church by women and men just like us. In each and every one of these places the community of faith bears the love of God, shares the love of God, and gives expression to the love of God. It does not matter what religion you belong to – Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist – we are all called to be the vehicles of divine mercy and justice. The words of the prophet Micah ring through the hills and mountain tops, valleys and plains, oceans and deserts, “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” Notice that Micah did not say “my God” but “your God.” His claim is made on every human being. Even if you are not sure you walk with any god at all, we are each commissioned to justice and mercy. I believe that is part of what it means to be a human being.

The unfailing love of God is in our minds, our hearts, and our hands. This is the future of the world. Sadly, in times of terrorism too many people close their minds, shut the windows on their souls, and clench their fists. There is no salvation – no future – in such fear, intolerance, and anger.

As one who believes that God is the author of freedom I think that God's unfailing love is expressed in our Constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion. (I also think that means freedom from religion.) The Maccabees refused to abandon their faith in Yahweh and be forced into submission to Roman Imperial theology. They would choose to die rather than bend their knee to Caesar. Our Congregational forebears, both Puritans and Pilgrims, came to America in part for religious freedom. Baptists, Universalists, Quakers, the Amish, Mennonites and many others would follow them.

Religious freedom means that we too are committed to the freedom of every religion that sails into every American port. Every time we try to block the right of Muslims to build a mosque our freedom is eroded. Every time someone defaces a synagogue our religious freedom is degraded. Every time someone burns or

bombs a black church our religious freedom is diminished. We have to love every person enough to protect his or her religious freedom. This is the kind of freedom that the Twin Towers represented with its many nations and religions that were employed there. This is the kind of freedom that military and civilian personnel in Pentagon are sworn to protect. This is the kind of freedom that pulse through the hearts of firefighters, police officers and EMTs on September 11, 2001. This is the freedom that is the pillar of churches everywhere in this great country. As Congregationalists we should know that better than anyone.

Unfailing love is timeless commitment. Unfailing grace is hard work. But if we work at it I think we will find that there are plenty of people who will join us. We will forge new faith and fresh relationships. Unfailing grace opens new windows into the future and we will be amazed at the hands that will hold our own. We will laugh and sing with the music of salvation.

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