

Refuge and Strength Psalm 46

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost/12th September 2021

Church historian and religion scholar Diana Butler Bass tweeted earlier this week: “Don’t be surprised if you have a hard time in the next few days. For all who remember the events of twenty years ago, your body and heart may rehearse sadness, anger, fear...all sorts of emotions. Be gentle to yourself and others. Act kindly. Do a good deed or two.”

It’s been a very emotional week. Every year is tough. This year it’s been different. The first anniversary of 9-11 was intense, and then there was the tenth anniversary, but the twentieth anniversary...this year feels different. It’s tender, raw. Many friends have said the same this week. Maybe it has something to do with the recent collapse of Afghanistan, the scenes from Kabul airport, the triumph of the Taliban—the Taliban that harbored Al-Qaeda twenty years ago. We look back and now see these twenty years in a new light, a different light, and we are left with many questions.

Perhaps the poignancy many are feeling this year is related to what we’ve all been through these past eighteen months, even more conscious of the fragility of life. Some 2,750 people died in New York City, 184 at the Pentagon, and 40 in Shanksville, PA. On January 25, 2021, 3,063 Americans died from COVID-19. On September 10 and 11, there were [3,109 COVID-19 deaths](#).¹ In 2001, we were united in our care for our neighbor, we felt together, we reached out for those in need. Although shaken, we felt we were on solid ground. But that didn’t last long. That was probably the last time we felt united as a nation, perhaps because we had an enemy in common. Today, we are more divided than ever. We can’t even agree that wearing a mask is a good thing for the common good. Today, everything feels so tenuous, unsure. Perhaps it’s just human nature, but do we always need an enemy to unite us? Why is it so difficult for us to be united in doing *good*, striving together for the good of our neighbor, the good of our children, the good of our communities?

Consider the lost, the cost, the deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq, the military personnel, the destruction of innocent lives. War and war and more war. \$300 million per day for twenty years, according to President Biden. This year’s graduating high school seniors have never lived in a nation not at war. Consider the cost. 9/11 was a day of such extraordinary violence. Followed by twenty years of enormous levels of violence. I’m reminded of something that Parker Palmer wisely said, “Violence is what happens when we don’t know what else to do with our suffering.”²

We each remember where we were on that fateful morning. Do you remember how blue the sky was that day? And we remember how we first heard the news, how the day unfolded, the fear, the anxiety, the confusion. I remember how parents started showing up at the Child Care Center, mid-morning, to take their children home. We just wanted to be near our loved ones. To feel safe. To be home. We each have our stories, how we were connected to the events of the day, whether directly or indirectly. [Elizabeth Wainio](#), who died on United Airlines Flight 93 in Shanksville was from Catonsville.³ Dorothy Boulton, as a native New Yorker, has her own

feelings of what that day was like. She said, “I couldn’t comprehend what was going on. When the buildings fell...absolute grief.”

Growing up in North Arlington, NJ, in the shadows of New York, ten miles from the Holland Tunnel I could see the Manhattan skyline, including the World Trade Center, from my high school. It was a daily presence. I had a visceral connection with those buildings. If you ever visited the towers, walked around inside, went up to the observation deck, you know they were truly massive. I had a lot of friends and family I was worried about on that day. My cousin Gary Lesslie worked in World Trade Center 4 and ran to Penn Station to get one of the last trains out for New Jersey, running past a jet engine that landed on the street. The brothers of friends were firemen and policemen who were to witness it all. One was Jimmy Zadroga. Jimmy and his brother Joseph, and their parents, were good friends of my family. Jimmy died in 2006 from a respiratory disease attributed to his participation in rescue and recovering operations in the rubble of the World Trade Center. Jimmy became the namesake for the [James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act of 2010](#), which provides health monitoring and financial aid to 9/11 first responders and survivors.⁴

So much changed that day. The trauma we experienced continues to send shockwaves through our lives and communities, through this nation, through the church. Worship attendance increased, throughout the nation, for several weeks after 9/11, but then it started to drop off, followed by twenty years of steady decline. People fed up with religion and belief, people disgusted by organized religion, repulsed by religious fundamentalism and religious extremism, sickened by Christians wrapping themselves in nationalism and distorting Christianity beyond recognition, beyond anything the majority of Americans want anything to do with, so far from Christ.

Twenty years ago, in the days following 9/11, we turned to Psalm 46. I remember, then, how much comfort and assurance that psalm offered us. It’s as if it was written for us. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear....” (Ps. 46:1-2a). It was, it is a strong reminder that in chaotic and anxious times that our refuge and strength are found only in God. God has proved time and again that God is faithful and in the faithfulness of God we find refuge, we are given shelter from the storm swirling all around us. And in the shelter of God we can rest, “be still” (Ps. 46:10), rest with confidence, find and experience God’s strength within us—an indomitable strength, steadfast, sure, constant, a strength that is deeper than our fears and anxieties, deeper than the fantasies and imaginings of our nervous egos that search for strength in ourselves or in armies or in wealth or forces of domination and control or ideologies of nations or political philosophies or political affiliations that all too easily become gods, false gods that we look to save us, to give us refuge, to give us strength.

The Psalmist tells us that there is a river that runs through the city. The place where we dwell. The river, flowing with life is the life of God that gives life to God’s people. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God” (Ps. 46:4). That is the source of our joy. That is the source of our strength. As nations rage and totter all around us (Ps. 46:6), the psalmist calls us back to God, to the *Living God*—not the “God” of our understanding, not to the “God” of nationalism, not to the “God” of war, but the *Living God* who stands in judgment over *all* peoples and *all* nations for their stubborn unwillingness to strive for that “still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31), who refuse to live into the blessedness and the cost that together come with

laboring in the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:1-17), who continue to reject God's *shalom*, God's peace, the God "who makes wars cease to the ends of the earth, [who] breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire" (Ps. 46:9).

This week, J. Herbert Nelson, Stated Clerk of the PCUSA, [said](#), "It is my prayer that we forge a new path going forward so that twenty years from now, people are commemorating a restored sense of humanity and Christ's love over the hate and violence that came before."⁵ This is the work toward which we are called as children of God.

As we all know, a lot of bad and evil things have occurred in this nation and around the world as a result of 9/11. And we also know that that's not the full story. A lot of good, love, compassion, courage, and light emerged from the ashes and dust of that horrific day. And a lot of good, love, compassion, courage, light, and an enormous amount of creativity has come from the depths of the soul as a response to the tragedy of that day, fed by the waters of life that flow through the human psyche.

Here's one example. The musical "[Come From Away](#)," a musical about 9/11. "Come From Away" tells the story of what happened in the small town of Gander in the province of Newfoundland, Canada, the week following 9/11.⁶ The musical debuted in 2013 and arrived on Broadway in 2017. Based on actual events, on 9/11, thirty-eight planes were ordered to land unexpectedly in Gander when the American air space was closed to travel. Gander at one time has the largest airfield in North America. Some 7,000 stranded travelers were housed and fed by residents of this town for almost a week. Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* [said](#), "Come From Away" is a "cathartic reminder of the capacity for human kindness in even the darkest of times" and the triumph of humanity over hate.⁷

The musical takes its name from this line, "*Because we come from everywhere, we all come from away.*" There's a moving scene when passengers of different religions go to a local church and library, the nearest quiet building to pray. Although each person is speaking a different language – Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi, and English – their prayers all follow the same theme. Even though the passengers pray in different ways they are all united through their faith and the comfort it brings them and others, and that theme is peace.

One character, Kevin, remembers a recent dream that contained music. It was an old hymn that he knew when he was a kid. "I haven't been to church in years, but for some reason that song was in my head." And then he realizes it was a setting of the Peace Prayer by St. Francis of Assisi (d.1226), a prayer that roots and grounds us and unites us and holds us and reminds us what keeps a human life human and what makes a human life holy:

Lord, make me a channel of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, 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.

May it be so.



National September 11 Memorial and Museum, New York New York

¹ See Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>.

² Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 1999).

³ See Libby Solomon's article in the *Catonsville Times* from 2017: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-county/catonsville/ph-ca-at-wainio-9-11-0920-story.html>. Here is the National Park Service's tribute to Elizabeth Wainio: <https://www.nps.gov/flni/learn/historyculture/honor-elizabeth-wainio.htm>.

⁴ For more information, see:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Zadroga_9/11_Health_and_Compensation_Act.

⁵ Stated Clerk remembers September 11, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 8, 2021: https://pres-outlook.org/2021/09/stated-clerk-remembers-september-11/?fbclid=IwAR3KZ6cJUgxc4Hh8m8imptXs95gZXQkUzatqn2ri_RJkOQDTXD5FJZFId34.

⁶ Come From Away, <https://comefromaway.com/>. Music and lyrics by Irene Sankoff and David Hein. A recorded version of the musical is available on AppleTV+:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Af77C4zUkjs>.

⁷ Ben Brantley, 'Come From Away,' a Canadian Embrace on a Grim Day, *The New York Times*, March 12, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/12/theater/come-from-away-review.html>.