

Six Degrees of Separation
Psalm 121

FUPC
Sept. 11, 2016

Its been fifteen years since we awoke to the horrific tragedy unfolding in NYC, Washington D.C. and a field in Pennsylvania on the Monday morning of Sept. 11, 2001. It was a defining moment for America and for the world. It changed everything. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you got the news? For the rest of the day, and for weeks after, we were united by the realization that in some profound way, our lives would never be the same again.

On Sept. 14, Paul Spreadbury wrote this reflection:

On Monday we emailed jokes. On Tuesday we did not.

On Monday we were talking about heroes as being athletes. On Tuesday, we relearned who our real heroes are.

On Monday we were irritated that our rebate checks had not arrived; On Tuesday we gave money away to people we had never met.

On Monday there were people fighting against prayer in schools; On Tuesday you would have been hard pressed to find a school where someone was not praying.

On Monday, parents argued with their kids about cleaning up their rooms. On Tuesday, the same parents could not get home fast enough to hug their kids.

On Monday, people were upset that they had to wait 6 minutes in a supermarket line; On Tuesday, people didn't care about waiting up to 6 hours to give blood for the dying.

On Monday we waved our various flags signifying our cultural diversity; On Tuesday, we all waved the American flag.

On Monday, there were people trying to separate each other by race, sex, color and creed; On Tuesday we were all holding hands.

On Monday, we had families; On Tuesday we had orphans.

The playwright John Guare wrote in his play *Six Degrees of Separation* that every single one of us is separated from everyone else in the world by only six other people. The trick is to find the right six people. So I have a question for you: Raise your hand if you personally know someone who lost their life as a result of the terrorist attack 15 years ago. Raise you hand if you know someone who knows someone who lost their life as a result of the terrorist attack 15 years ago. Already, everyone in this congregation is just three degrees removed at most from someone who lost their life. We are a connected world. What happens in one part of the world affects every other part. What tragedies unfold in the lives of people in Nice, France, Turkey, Syria, Orlando Florida and any other place where violence and mass killings have taken place... eventually affects us all.

I have a rather impertinent question. Perhaps this question has occurred to you but you have not dared to ask it. Well, I will ask it for you. I wonder, where was God on September 11? Contrary to what the terrorists believe, I cannot believe that God was with the men who flew the planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field. They were convinced that they were agents of divine punishment against the "wickedness" of America.

Is that where God was on that horrible day, visiting retribution on the "wicked"? Is our God that vengeful? And if so, then who of us deserves to live? I don't buy it for one millisecond. If that's what God is like, then count me out. If God claims to love us with infinite love on the one hand, and, on the other, commissions some irrational fanatics to take thousands of lives as a form of punishment--

then, my friends, we are involved with a schizophrenic deity in a relationship that is at best tentative and at worst, violently abusive.

Where was God on September 11? I believe God was in the rubble with those who perished in the fire and the collapse of the Towers. I believe God was in the rubble with the firemen and policemen who rushed into the building to rescue their brothers and sisters, and themselves died when the Towers collapsed. I believe God was in the rubble of the Pentagon offices that were destroyed and in the fuselage of the plane that went down in the Pennsylvania countryside. There are still people dying from that event as a result of breathing the toxic dust searching through the rubble of the collapsed buildings. It's estimated that more than 2500 firemen, policemen and other workers have died from cancer that was a result of working in the dust and rubble following the attack. Several thousand more have been diagnosed and are living with various cancers and respiratory diseases.

I believe God is in the rubble that has been created around the world since 2001 too many times by more terrorists and mentally unhinged mass killers who set off bombs, run down innocent people with trucks, and spray bullets into five year old kids with automatic weapons. I believe in a God who NEVER leaves us or forsakes us, even though it may feel like it when everything appears to be collapsing around us.

Today's Scripture reading from Psalm 121 is about a traveler who is on a journey that will take him or her through a mountain range. We read the familiar words, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills from whence comes my help." It sounds as though the traveler expects to find help from the mountain range, from the hills. But a small punctuation change transforms the meaning of the Psalm completely. "I will lift up my eyes to the hills. Where will my help come from?"

The traveler's journey will take him through a mountain range in which he will be challenged, discouraged, endangered, exhausted, and sometimes lost. As he looks ahead to that formidable obstacle in his path, he wonders, how will I ever get through? How can I make it past the huge mountains in my path? That's his question: Where will my help come from?

The rest of the Psalm spells out the answer to his question: My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The Creator who is intimately familiar with those mountains, who is intimately acquainted with me and my possibilities and failures and limitations, that same Creator will get me through those mountains.

We are all on a journey that sometimes exposes us to mortal danger and irrational tragedies. Some of our journeys take us through the darkness of death and the loss of loved ones. Other journeys lead through debilitating illness or life-changing injuries. Some journeys lead through the wilderness of financial stress and still others through the relentless demands of caregiving for a loved one, wandering in the desert of dementia or alzheimers. There are those who live in a relationship that is disintegrating and bringing pain to both people and they feel lost, frustrated and hopeless.

Its easy to look at the mountain ranges in our lives and grow afraid, discouraged and weary. We want to give up. We feel paralyzed and unable to move forward because the dangers all around us and ahead of us take all our courage and strength and reduce them to smoke and dust. Even Jesus felt forsaken--He cried, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me? Where are you?"

If that's where you are today, then Psalm 121 is God's promise for you. Each step of the way, step by step, moment by moment, the promise is that your foot will not slip, God will not go to sleep on you.

You will not be forgotten or forsaken. Though life be full of uncertainty, danger and unexpected tragedy, you will never walk alone.

God was there with Jesus, on that cross, and out of death He brought resurrection. God didn't cause this mess we're in. God didn't cause the mess you're in. God didn't hire those murdering terrorists to even the score with people they thought were evil. And your present pain is not a punishment for some failure or poor choice you may have experienced.

The Good News for today is that, in the mystery of our brokenness, God appears and stands with us. In the dust and ashes of failure and humiliation, God makes himself at home. In the hopelessness and humility of our weakness, God stands beside us. God did not create the rubble all around us, but you can surely find God right in the middle of it.

In the middle of the rubble that surrounded Jesus' arrest and trial and crucifixion, stands a cross. That cross is a sign and symbol of God's presence in the darkest, most evil and hate filled moments of our lives. God's response was not to send lightning, and a cataclysmic catastrophe to wipe out Jesus' attackers. That might be our knee-jerk response... retribution, revenge, reprisal. But hatred and vengeance only serves to diminish and destroy the hater. God's response was an expression of love so profoundly deep and powerful that we can only bow our heads in awestruck silence. Love became stronger than hate at the cross. And Life became stronger than death when Jesus walked out of the tomb. The miracle of transcending love and resurrection from the dead is at the heart of God's healing presence in our lives.

Transcending the pain and disappointment of our personal tragedies is pretty much the most spiritually challenging and profound inner work we will do in this life. It is a given that there will be hurts, disappointments, betrayals, regrets and failures. It is never easy and not even humanly natural for us to just walk away from the 9/11 moments of our lives as though it didn't matter and everything's OK. Its not OK! Transcending our broken-world moments is "Spirit Work" in which the miracle of healing comes in small increments over time. If we are willing and open, God helps us to forgive the unforgivable, release the anger and resentment, affirm the goodness in ourselves and others, and find peace, stillness and tranquility. Its not automatic. Its never easy. It's a choice. And we're always in charge of our choices.

Today, we remember those whose lives were cut short by the tragedy of Sept. 11, and all those who searched through the rubble looking for survivors. We remember the families who lost a father, mother, son or daughter, a partner and spouse, a child, a beloved co-worker, a good friend. We remember all those since Sept. 11 in the more than 20,000 terrorist attacks that have occurred around the world. Please join me by standing together (if you are able) in a time of silent remembrance to honor their memory. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

Creator God, we are created in your image. Whether we come from different faiths and homelands, languages and cultures, we are all brothers and sisters in the human family. We cry out to you today to help us recognize our connection to the people we love, people we've never met, and people we are tempted to hate. Give us the wisdom to choose love over hate. We pray for our nation and our world in its brokenness. We are left speechless in the face of the divisions and prejudices that lead us to judge each other to the point of violence and murder. We pray that you help heal the scars of this world's wars and animosities. We mourn the loss of security and freedom that comes when we don't trust each other. We mourn the loss of innocence and the anxiety we carry within us when we think about getting on a plane and traveling to far places. We are scarred by the experiences of our lives that have left us emotionally disabled and hurting. Please heal us. Let us claim a victory of love by drawing close to those from whom we have become alienated, by forgiving old injuries, by releasing our pain to the healing presence of your Spirit in the deepest darkest places of our lives. Hear our prayers and teach us to love others as we are loved by you. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who defined love forever by willingly hanging on a cross. Amen.