

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

September 11, 2011

XIII Pentecost (Proper 19), Exodus 13:17-14:31, & Romans 14:1-12

Ten years ago – within minutes of this very hour – I walked down my grandparents’ hallway in an undershirt, when I noticed a smoking building pictured on the den television set. Peter Jennings, my family, and I, wondered what kind of terrible accident had occurred. And then, before I could tighten my tie, we watched a plane fly into a second building, and, slowly, an awful confirmation of unspoken fears began to take hold.

I had travelled to Monroe and Rayville, Louisiana, for my cousin’s grandmother’s funeral. And after her committal and the reception that morning, I drove back to seminary here in Austin. I listened to NPR’s reporting of the attack on the World Trade Center the length of that eight-hour drive. Their coverage created an aural history of that day: sirens and sobbing; cries and crashes; furor and footsteps. When I stopped for gas, I rolled down the windows of the car and kept the stereo turned loud so that I could keep listening even while I filled my tank. I ate while I drove so that I could hear what happened next, whatever it might be, or might not be, or might be reported it could be and had been. In the days and weeks after September 11, 2001, I kept vigil in front of the television and before my computer. I waited, expectantly, for the worst, *drowning* in a flood of fear, foreboding, and dread...

Moses and the Israelites flee the Egyptians and reach the edge of the Red Sea. They stop at the shore, turn, and see Pharaoh’s army barreling down upon them. Realizing that Pharaoh’s army – its chariots and its drivers, more than 600 strong – will not relent in their pursuit, the Israelites must choose between fighting this unassailable foe, or else plunging into the deep and murky waters before them.

We know what happens: when the Israelites cry out to God in their panic, the waters part. Moses and his friends travel safely through the abyss, and when the Egyptians pursue them, Pharaoh’s men are drowned by God’s very hand. About this victory, I have sung songs with schoolchildren: “I will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea...”

In our seasons, we have known the waters to rise high on our left and on our right, allowing us safe passage through danger, for reasons we do not understand and that we have not earned. And so, too, we have known those same waters to swallow us whole until we were sure that we would drown. Hearing this story of God’s victory and vengeance on this anniversary day, we – so accustomed to the role of worldly victors – must confront again our shared experience at the bottom of the sea...in the depths of the abyss...beneath the heavy ashes. Remembering the sounds of that day, seeing the images again, I can feel the familiar foreboding swelling inside of me, the dread settling into my bones, the waves of urgency to check my phone for news, to look behind me, to get home, *all* pawing at my attention. And yet I know that fidelity to those anxieties will not keep me safe.

The sense of security we as a nation gave ourselves permission to enjoy before September 11, 2001, was not real. The world provided no guarantees for our good fortune before then, and the world provides no guarantees for our good fortune now. Therefore, if we are to find Peace, *real Peace* for our restless hearts, ultimately, neither increased airport security nor more effective spy networks will make a fulfilling provision. To know Peace within ourselves and to sow peace among nations we will need to seek resource beyond this world's cold caprice and cheap reassurances. And this is our resource: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's [possession]...Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life...I give you a new commandment: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another...Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Romans 14:7-8, Matthew 11:28, John 3:16, John 13:34-35, Matthew 28:20).

I want to tell you that yesterday was a big, bright, beautiful day...and I have the sunburn to testify to it: Missy got donuts with the kids; I played baseball with my son; my daughter wore pretend earrings and attended a tea party at a friend's birthday; I drank a good cup of coffee I brewed in our kitchen, and I walked to the office late, kissed two fingers and held them up to the first star I saw, making a wish that I could scarcely say hadn't already come true for me that very day, come true for me a hundred times, over and over and over. Yes, yesterday was too beautiful, *too beautiful* to allow the world's fears to become my own again. No matter the anniversary, no matter the adversity, no matter *what*: every day is too beautiful to give away to fear...even today.

Of course, the struggle does not end with these spoken words: these sentiments require enlivening. For the Israelites, their salvation at the Red Sea did not usher an age of security, but *forty years* of confusion in the wilderness. So, too, do we know there will be wilderness ahead for us. And, even so, we remember that when the Israelites reached the other side – an imminent danger so soon passed and an uncertain future yet ahead – they shook their tambourines, celebrated, and refused to give into their familiar complaints and fears.

Likewise, we honor God's good gifts on this day, trusting that the Body of Christ can bear both our solemnity and our frivolity, indeed that one will find its fullest expression in companion with one another. And no matter what deep and murky waters might remain before us, and no matter what grievous memory lurks behind us, we tie balloons to our doorways; we have breakfast together; and we welcome a new year of ministry here at Good Shepherd. We hear these old stories and proclaim, "Thanks be to God." And rather than relenting in our loving, letting loose of our joy, or forgiving ourselves the blessing of being a blessing, today we give thanks and celebrate, making our Easter song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!