

THE CHURCH AT GROUND ZERO
Independence Day –June 30, 2013 – Isaiah 9: 8-17
The Church of the Covenant

I have a *mea culpa* at the very beginning of this sermon. The sermon I preached after the twin towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed, and the Pentagon had an airplane dive into it, and flight 92 came crashing down here in Western Pennsylvania was a sermon of comfort to the people –“*What some intended for evil, God can use for good.*” But more than a decade later I think I was wrong; I may have been much more as our scripture says, “*the prophet who teaches lies*” and one who “*leads this people (have led) them astray.*” (Isaiah 9: 15 & 16) People wanted a word of comfort on the Sunday after 9-11 and that’s what I gave them; but what we wanted and what we needed perhaps are two very different things. Perhaps we need a word of challenge today.

I watched as the churches were filled to overflow right after 9-11 but within about 3 or 4 months they resumed their lifeless emptying. Once people received their comfort we went on to lead our lives as we had before, without turning our heart toward God or amending our ways. Indeed, 10 plus years later I am shocked at the nation and how increasingly callous it is toward God. For more and more people God isn’t even on the radar screen of their lives, let alone the central reality around which all else revolves. I read a book recently entitled “*The Harbinger*” by Jonathan Cahn which is a spiritual explanation of the events of 9-11. It is eye-opening and sobering all in one.

I remember various politicians in the aftermath of 9-11 reading the Bible verses from Isaiah 9 that we just read: “*The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place.*” (Isaiah 9: 10) Our politicians were trying to reassure us that they would rebuild even bigger and better than before; but what they didn’t say was also significant –we don’t need to turn our hearts and our nation toward God; WE can rebuild; we can replace bricks with stone; we can replant fallen sycamores with sturdier cypress. WE can do this ourselves. “We don’t need no stinkin’ god. But in a way by quoting this Bible verse out of context they were heaping coals on their own heads. These Bible verses were not positively quoted by the prophet Isaiah; they were meant to show how far the leadership had fallen from God; they were an indictment on a people who thought they didn’t need God and who were not going to return to Him. They were an indictment of spiritual leaders who had sought to heal the wounds of the nation too easily; who had placed a band aid on a mortal wound. Leaders who said, “*peace, peace*” when there is no peace. This quote from Isaiah was the prophet’s indictment on a leadership and on a people who thought that they did not need God. Our politicians thought they were quoting something to bring comfort, but all they really did was to show their ignorance in relation to scripture and to the ways of the Almighty.

The politicians missed the entire context of the verses. The people and leaders were to repent and return to God but instead they shook their fist at fate and said in effect, on our own, apart from God, we will rebuild bigger and better than ever. And they missed the other context of these verses which appear immediately prior, which are the famous prediction of the birth of the Messiah, “*unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given*” and his name will be called “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*” and “*OF THE INCREASE OF HIS GOVERNMENT AND OF PEACE THERE WILL BE NO END.*” (Isaiah 9: 6 & 7) Peace comes from the Prince of Peace. The increase of government comes from no politician; it comes from JESUS, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings! The solution to 9-11 wasn’t hewn stone and replanted cedars; the solution is JESUS. We haven’t tried that one yet.

I also remember the news stories of the St. Paul Chapel, an Episcopal Church almost at the foot of the fallen World Trade Center, where there was a large sycamore tree, probably going back to the time of the Revolutionary War, that had stood for over two hundred years, in the old churchyard. When the World Trade Center fell on 9-11, while it wrought destruction on buildings blocks further away St. Paul's Chapel was spared. But in its churchyard the large sycamore was cut down by a piece of falling debris from the World Trade Center. The sycamores were cut down. In that churchyard today are two things: a sculpture of an uprooted tree with these Bible verses from Isaiah on them, and a replacement pine tree in the cedar family. The sycamore was cut down by 9-11 but we will put cedars in their place. The walls of the World Trade Center have come tumbling down but we will rebuilt an even bigger building, the Freedom Center, in its place...without of course, even tipping our hat to the Almighty.

Upon further reflection, I think that the attack on 9-11 was not just an attack on the nation by some random terrorists. It was significant what the terrorists targeted –the World Trade Center, the symbol of our economic might –the Pentagon, the symbol of our military might –the Capital building in Washington, D.C., the symbol of our political might. All of the things that give us security as a people and as a nation came under attack. But there was one more thing that came under attack on 9-11. This one was missed by most people because of how secular they are and because they do not remember their own history. Unwittingly, St. Paul's Chapel, at the foot of the World Trade Center, came under attack. And what is the significance of St. Paul's Chapel?

On April 30, 1789 the first President of the United States, under the new Constitution, took the oath of office in Federal Hall in what was then the capitol of the United States of America, New York City. It is roughly on the site of Wall Street today. George Washington as he took the oath of office added the words, spontaneously at the end of the oath, which was not printed nor prepared in advance, Washington added the words "So help me God" to end of the oath of office. Presidents ever since have included it. George Washington then marched the entire Congress to St. Paul's Chapel Episcopal Church where he and the entire leadership of the nation knelt in prayer and consecrated the United States of America to God. The entire Congress and its new President then received communion as their first act. The first act of the new nation was held within the walls of a church, was begun as the leaders humbled themselves and knelt in prayer, began as our leaders received communion and acknowledged that it is God alone who has given us the gift of this nation and our freedom, success, peace and prosperity. The nation began in prayer and was consecrated to God by its first President. The proclamation on that day is this: "the bells will ring at 9 o'clock, when the people may go up to the house of God and in a solemn manner commit the new government, with its important train of consequences, to the holy protection and blessing of the Most High..." (The Constitutional Convention, Barton, 2010) Many prayers were prayed that day but it was clear that the new President believed that if the United States ever forget the God who had given it its life and breath, that the holy protection and blessing should be removed. Washington's Prayer for the United States appears on a plaque in St. Paul's Chapel. He prayed:

Almighty God,

We make our earnest prayer that Thou wilt keep the United States in Thy Holy protection...(And) that Thou wilt most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind which were the Characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without a humble imitation of whose example in these things we can never hope to be a happy nation. Grant our supplication, we beseech Thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now some people get all hung up on whether God CAUSED 9-11 or not, or whether God PERMITTED 9-11 or not, or whether God made it a judgment on a people who had turned their back on Him or not, or whether it is just the evil act of some evil men, or whether it is purely random and without any spiritual significance whatsoever. But all of this is just a smokescreen that gets us off track and begs the real issue. The issue isn't what God did or didn't do; the issue is what is our response to 9-11? Do we shake our fist at fate and at God and suggest that on our own we can rebuild bigger and better than before? That we will replant a cedar tree for every fallen sycamore? That God is nowhere in the equation of our life or of the life of our nation? Or do we do as our founders did and humble ourselves? And pray? And understand that every good and perfect gift of freedom, liberty, peace and abundance comes from God's Almighty Hand? Personally, I think the United States over the past decade has chosen the former path. And personally, I think we need to acknowledge that this has not worked, and I think we need to kneel in prayer again and re-consecrate our nation to God.

It is interesting, isn't it, that FOUR things, not three, came under attack on 9-11? The World Trade Center, the symbol of our economic might; the Pentagon, the symbol of our military might; the Capitol Building was targeted but not hit, the symbol of our political might AND, AND St. Paul's Chapel, the symbol of the spiritual beginning of our nation, on its knees in prayer and celebrating the sacrament of communion.

I also think it interesting that St. Paul's Chapel, in the midst of all the carnage of that day, was preserved to remind us how we began as a nation...and how we can begin again. The Church at Ground Zero is there to remind us, both how far we have fallen, and how to begin again. There is nothing we can rebuild or replant without God. We need the Prince of Peace –Jesus. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*