

SPARED FOR A HIGHER PURPOSE
Special Service of Remembrance for 9/11
September 11, 2016 Romans 9: 14-18
The Church of the Covenant

A dear friend in this congregation put me onto a wonderful little book about the firefighters who ran into the burning World Trade Center on 9/11. It is entitled "Firehouse" by David Halberstam and I commend it to you from our church library. It notes that of all the firefighters who ran into the burning building that day only one, Kevin Shea, had escaped alive, badly injured, but still alive. And he wrestled with the feelings of survivor's guilt, why was he alone spared? Where was God on 9/11? Why me, Lord? (Firehouse, Halberstam, p. 177 ff.) I believe he was SPARED for a higher purpose. There was the man in my former congregation in Virginia, perhaps you remember the news stories, whose wife was ill that fateful day 15 years ago, and so he was taking his child to day care instead of sitting at his desk in the Pentagon where he would have surely been incinerated. His office ground zero. Why? I spoke with him as his pastor and told him I believed he was spared for a reason and now he must spend the rest of his life figuring that out. Spared for a higher purpose. There was another man, a Naval Commander from my congregation in the Personnel area of the Pentagon where the plane plowed directly into, but miraculously he was in a meeting on the other side of the Pentagon so only heard a dull thud when the plane crashed. Friends died. But he asked me why he had not died? I said, I do not know, but I know you were spared for a reason. As I was thinking over it in preparation for this sermon I was shocked to have a thought that I have never had previously – I was flying in and out of Reagan National Airport, the airport right next to the Pentagon, the very week before 9/11 to do a series of stewardship sermons in Florida that week through the Presbyterian Foundation. Why wasn't I on one of the planes the highjackers commandeered? Why didn't my plane plow into the Pentagon? Spared for a higher purpose. Purely as an aside, I think sometimes when we are going through terrible things in life we are tempted to ask, "Why me, Lord?" "Where are You in the midst of my pain, Lord?" "God, where were You on 9/11?" When we get to heaven one of the things the Lord will show us is the 1,000 times in this life when HE intervened and we did not even know HE intervened and HE spared us from some terrible happenstance in life, and we never even knew it. Clueless and oblivious, we were spared and we were spared by the loving God who says, "*My ways are not your ways*". Spared for a higher purpose.

Our Bible verses from Romans are helpful, I think. The Apostle Paul is alluding to all of salvation history as he traces the story from God's compassion in freeing the slaves of Egypt to God's compassion in freeing us from the bondage of sin through Jesus Christ. Why are some children of God, children of the covenant, heirs of the promise and others are not? It is quoted in this Romans passage – God says: "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*" (Romans 9: 15) God reaches out in love to all people, but God also knows in advance due to His omniscience, which of the people will also reach out to Him. So He says of Egypt and the Pharaohs, "*I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.*" (Romans 9: 17) God gives power to nations like Egypt or like the United States, for very specific reasons and purposes. The United States has been raised up for mighty purposes beyond our own selves. Israel was raised up as a people also to show God's mighty power at work in the world. Israel was raised up as children of God, covenantally linked to the Lord, in order to affect great and mighty purposes in the world through them, now revealed through the Son, Jesus Christ.. And then may I say, that the NEW COVENANT shed in Jesus' blood, has been established in order to do the same. Jesus died on a cross and He shed His blood, in order to save us and redeem us, not because we are worthy of that blood. No, we shall NEVER BE worthy of the spilled blood of Jesus. He died for us not because we are so NICE or such NEAT people. No, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He let us in on the covenant originally forged through Moses and the old covenant, purely and simply out of His mercy, HIS choice, "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy*", Him outreaching to us in love. But it is not for the end of us being blessed. It is not for the end product being that we personally get to go to heaven. No. There are great and mighty purposes far beyond our own personal salvation that then GOD expects us to live out to be and become for HIM. We were bought with a price. He died for us that we might LIVE for HIM! O self-centered ego infused Americans, get it out of our head

and out of our heart that Jesus died just for us. No. Jesus died for a high and mighty purpose far beyond you, far beyond my little mind and my littler heart. No, no no. Says the Lord: *"I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, (the Lord says) so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."* You were spared for a higher purpose. I was spared for a higher purpose. The Church of the Covenant was spared for a higher purpose. The United States has been spared for a higher purpose. And that purpose was never about just us alone. It has always been about God's purposes far beyond ourselves...We have been spared for a higher purpose!

So what are those purposes? I believe when we think back over what happened on 9/11 some 15 years ago we will have some hints of what those great and mighty purposes might be. Remember after 9/11? Everyone was brought closer together. We sort of huddled together as family and friends and neighbors and communities and as a nation. Petty differences were set aside. Political squabbings ceased. People came together instead of being torn apart. What is important became important and what was unimportant became clearly unimportant. Neighborliness was rediscovered. People reached out and cared for one another. We would sing "God bless America" and mean it. Families rededicated themselves to caring for one another and spending time with one another. I remember looking out my pastor study window in Alexandria, Virginia and before 9/11 I would see little red vans dropping off the preschool children. In Alexandria, Virginia parents were too busy and too well off to drop off their own children so they hired "The Little Red Wagon" to do it for them. But after 9/11 no more "Little Red Wagon", not even grandparents or the mothers dropped off their children. No, after 9/11 the FATHERS came into the building holding their children's hands to bring them to preschool. And by the way, the churches were packed to overflow. Everyone suddenly rediscovered that if the Lord doesn't watch over the nation the watchman stays awake in vain; if God doesn't protect the United States then we are open to every kind and sort of terrorist attack. The pews were full. In my church it was standing room only in the weeks after 9/11. 800 to 900 people a week returning to the Lord God Almighty. But by January 2002, it was all over. The pews were again emptying. The Little Red Wagon again bringing children to the preschool. People had forgotten their neighbors. We were too busy to care about community any more. We had again forgotten God. How sad to forget again who blesses us as a nation. How sad to forget who protects us as a nation. How sad to have forgotten that we were SPARED FOR A HIGHER PURPOSE. Spared to be and do and become ONE NATION UNDER GOD, who again makes a difference in our communities and world...Remember 9/11? I do.

It is hard to turn on a television newscast without hearing them use the word "horrific". The hurricane is horrific; the fire was horrific; the shooting was horrific. I don't know if you recall as I do that there was a day not too long ago when you never heard the word "horrific". I think the beginning of the use of the word "horrific" may be linked to the events of 9/11. That is my theory, at least. In the midst of the falling twin towers of the World Trade Center, and the conflagration of the burning Pentagon, and the crashing of Flight 93 out here in Western Pennsylvania a new word was discovered. "Horrific". Out of the charred remains, out of the visions of hell, out of the unthinkable happening, a new word was born. Horrific. Out of the horrors of that original 9/11 we may then choose how we respond to that which is indeed horrific. The Lord God says: *"I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you."* We have been raised up for a purpose. We have been spared for a great and mighty purpose set forth by God. Do not leave this sanctuary without grasping what that purpose is for your life. Do not skip blithely down the garden path thinking that the horrors of 9/11 cannot be used by a loving God to pour out grace and mercy and love...and a higher purpose for our own life. Why have you been spared? Why have you been saved by the blood of Jesus? Why have you been chosen? Why has God showered you with mercy? Beloved, it is time to figure it out...and to live our lives for the Lord. Amen and Amen.

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