

Strength To Endure – The Cloud, The Fire, The Cross
2 – Strength For The Journey

Exodus 14:19-31

Matthew 18:21-35

September 11, 2011 A Service of Remembrance, Comfort and Hope Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

*“How can I put into one thought the idea of God, Christ and the event of war? How can I think of the cross and God at the same time? And is it not precisely here that **the** answer is given, that stands over the whole Christian message: Christ goes through the cross, and only through the cross to life, to resurrection, to victory. The wondrous theme of the Bible that frightens so many people is that the only visible sign of God in the world is the cross. Christ is not carried away from earth to heaven in glory, but he must go to the cross. And precisely there, where the cross stands, the resurrection is near. Where it is on a razor’s edge, whether one becomes faithless or remains loyal – there God is, and there Christ is. Where the power of darkness does violence to the light of God, there God triumphs and judges the darkness.”ⁱ*

I

Signs have tremendous power to symbolize in shorthand larger truth. The big brown, black, and white blow-up cow on the roof of our new neighbor Chick fil a across the street communicates that chicken is to be found there. The Golden Arches of their rival McDonalds that hamburgers are found there, chicken too! Nike’s stripe says something about cool athletic equipment, and the old familiar red and white barber’s pole, at least on the Old Fashioned barber shop I go to, that haircuts may be had there. People in the advertising business talk about the importance of branding, saying in a word or phrase or symbol something that instantly communicates the nature of the business or organization being put forward. The cloud, the fire, the cross, say powerful things about God, his nature to lead, guide and protect, his nature to love and forgive to the uttermost, all the way to death. “Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through.” “Lift high the cross the love of Christ proclaim.”

Say “9/11” and you reference a sign, not only of a day – you reference a day the world and all our lives changed forever. In the Providence of God the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001 now universally known as 9/11, falls upon this Lord’s Day, and hence appropriately is remembered in worship. That horrendous assault upon our nation, and what followed, that claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 individuals, of more than 6,000 American troops, and many thousand more innocent Middle Easterners caught in the crossfire. It changed forever the way we live, and became the transformative event that shaped the past decade. People flocked to places of worship in record numbers just after 9/11 seeking comfort and meaning in the midst of meaningless chaos and evil. So today we have come, and in the midst of our regular worship, we remember, we receive and give comfort, we have hope renewed. It is appropriate that the remembrance portion of our service today is led by our youth who have grown from childhood to young adulthood over this decade that has so shaped who they are becoming. It is inspiring, this

side of 9/11, to see who they are becoming. So how many young adults committing their lives to vocations that directly are helping relieve human suffering and getting across the great love of God for this whole world. Scott Jeffreys, Sarah Koch, Drew Bonner, Catherine Bonner, Bryant Laney, Patrick Laney, being excellent examples.

We remember the surreal unfolding of events on that day ten years ago, seen initially as if they were some sort of specially scheduled part of the early morning TV shows. The first plane, then the second plane, flown like missiles with human payload into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, people tumbling from the tops of those buildings, the billowing cloud of smoke and ash, and collapse of those tallest buildings, the symbol of New York city. Then another plane flown into the Pentagon, then yet another, brought down in rural Pennsylvania by heroic passengers, that one headed for the White House or the Capital. It was, to quote Franklin D. Roosevelt of another horrendous event which brought the United States into War with Japan, and Germany, "a day of infamy."

We remember as well the amazing first responders, firemen and police, and National Guard, a celibate gay Roman Catholic priest who was a chaplain to the New York fire department. Those who risked their lives and who lost their lives helping people escape buildings that had become fiery furnaces. We remember the special services here and in places of worship throughout this nation and round the world. At one we hurriedly put together in Kentucky that Tuesday evening, I recall especially one member's pained question, spoken out during a period of open sharing and prayers, "Why do they hate us?" We remember how that day touched this congregation most directly as the sister of our member Dr. Richard Champion was killed as she sat working at her desk in the Pentagon.

Now, ten years later, 9/11 is seen in a different light. America's Righteous Response, if not always the correct action at every step along the way, brought down this evil international Al Quida movement, a response that comes to at least some degree of closure with the removal of Osama bin Laden, though the cells of this evil remain. This, together with the Arab Spring, whereby young people in nations across the Middle East have risen up and removed their own dictators, leads to a new if guarded sense of hope as we face the future.

I spoke to Dr. Richard Champion last week about his sister's family over these 10 years and he shared with me how his sister's two daughters have now both married, lawyers, one a Washington lawyer, one a Philadelphia lawyer, and how he and Shannon were recently present for the baptism of a niece born to one of the couples. So life has gone on. And it seems entirely appropriate on such a Sunday as this that we are celebrating the 50 years of promise keeping by John and Anne Homer as they renew their vows of commitment today. When John saw my sermon title for today, "Strength to Endure" he wrote me, "We laughed and thought how appropriate for Anne and Me!"

Ten years ago we as a nation came together, grieved, held each other, and resolved not to stoop to vengeance but to endure, to rise above it and, and work for justice. We heard, even as Matthew's Gospel points us today, of the essential need we have to forgive and receive forgiveness. For the most part our responses have been commendable. We have worked hard not to stereotype all Muslims as terrorists, and to pour energy into re-building and restoring

those whose lives were ripped apart. At the same time we in the United States, who suddenly came together as One, have drifted back to petty politics and partisan extremes, while vast problems with our economy, and our underlying moral values beckon for a 9/11 level or united response.

II

Israel too had come together as one in following the Lord's leading them out from slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh had finally been convinced by that 10th horrendous plague, the slaying of the firstborn sons of Egypt, to let God's people go, and off they headed into a desert on this seemingly impossible journey into freedom. Delivered, guided by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. These were but symbols. Behind those symbols was the Divine One himself, God the Lord.

Pharaoh quickly forgot the ills that had befallen him through his oppression of the Hebrew people. He changed his mind and sent his army and 600 specially chosen chariot drivers chasing after them. It looked as if the Israelites were done for. But God was in this, and, through Moses, parted the waters of the Red Sea and delivered his people through as on dry land. Their feet did not even get damp. Then God's Angel circled around behind them, separating the chosen people from their enemies. Sometimes when kids are fighting on the playground the only thing you can do is get them apart. Separate them. Between the two was the pillar of cloud and the flame of fire. What had been their guide was now their wall of protection, as the Egyptians roared into the dry seabed after them but could not reach them. And then God allowed the sea to return to its natural channel, thus drowning the Egyptians and their horsemen. "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore." A scene of deliverance. A scene too, of death and destruction.

Similarity of the symbols in the Biblical account and in New York on 9/11 cannot be missed, billowing clouds rising above the skyline, fires that continued through the night. Yet the symbols mean different things. One is of deliverance, the other of destruction. We dare not neatly equate the Egyptians of old with our enemies of recent times, nor see ourselves, the most powerful nation on earth as delivered Hebrew slaves. That is too simple. This great text must not be neatly and quickly transposed to fit the modern tragedy and its outworking.

Yet those symbols of cloud and fire do remind us of the God who is present in the midst of suffering and pain and loss, as we experienced on 9/11. The God who is with us. The God who delivers. And they point to an even greater sign, the Cross, ultimate symbol of failure and death, ultimate symbol of reconciliation and life.

Remember the Cross at Ground Zero? It was found on 9-13 by a rescue worker. A 20 foot steel beam, part of the girders from the fallen towers that formed a perfectly symmetrical cross. It became a symbol of hope in the midst of devastation and was set on a pedestal at Ground Zero. When I visited there a year later with sons Peter and Stuart, we saw that cross raised up above the level of the barrier that surrounded the city blocks of the gaping hole where the World Trade Center had been, so that looking in on the rubble, we looked through the Cross. And seeing that

Cross did give me a surge of hope. For the Cross is symbolic of the only and ultimate resolution to every expression of evil.

An unlikely alliance of crooked politicians and preachers conspired together to take out the world's most loving and grace-filled man, Jesus Christ, who was more than man, who was God walking and teaching and healing and forgiving among us. And God let them have their way with their evil plan. So they delivered this good innocent man to a cross of shame.

But that was not the end. That cross of shame became a sign of glory. That heinous means of death became the ultimate symbol of life. Crucifixion and death gave way to resurrection and life. Death was not the end, and hope could not be snuffed out. And what had been deemed foolishness and a stumbling block became God's transforming power and wisdom. The Cross has become our ultimate sign of hope. The Apostle Paul said, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (therefore) We preach Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and Christ the wisdom of God..."ⁱⁱ

Only the reality behind the symbol is sufficient to sustain us through a 9/11, suffering love unto death that, by the gift given and the love shared and the sacrifice made, destroyed death. "Death is swallowed up in victory. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

III

A Cross at Ground Zero became a sign of hope, that God's goodness and mercy and victory cannot be wiped away by the actions of evil men. The Cross, reminder that God's transformational love and forgiveness and purposes will prevail over all the earth. When life tumbles in on us, whether a 9/11 level act of destruction or a tornado or a rain storm, or the loss of our job, our health, our loved one, where do we turn? No trip to Disney World or one more reality TV show will bring us healing. Only the Cross. Only the Cross, and the depth of love expressed by God who went into and through the worst evil could do, went through hell itself, can heal and renew hope.

From that Cross Jesus cried out in prayer for his executioners and those who had delivered him, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Forgiveness then is the ultimate response we are called to make, and because of that Cross, the response we are capable of making. Forgiveness has an unequalled power to cleanse and renew us. Through forgiveness, of our enemies, of our family and co-workers and fellow church members and friends, asking forgiveness of any we have wronged, receiving forgiveness from any who have wronged us, forgiveness too of ourselves, the cross gives us the power to forgive ourselves. And through forgiveness we get our life back. Not to forgive is to be trapped in a strait jacket, closed in, curved over, fetal position, isolated, alone. To forgive is to open ourselves to the future – to relationship, to wonder and hope and the truth that, "All shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

An old Hasidic tale told by the rabbis describes how the angels were rejoicing over the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea, playing their harps, singing and dancing. "Wait," said one

of them, “Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping!” They approached God and asked, “Why are you weeping when Israel has been delivered by your power?” “I am weeping,” said the Maker of the Universe, “for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore – somebody’s sons, somebody’s husbands, somebody’s fathers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We lived through a Twentieth Century filled with unparalleled evil. Symbols of burning ships in Pearl Harbor, brown swastikas mounted over massive rallies in Germany, yellow Stars of David sown onto clothing of European Jews who later were thrown into corpse-filled ditches in Nazi death camps, napalmed children in Vietnam, giant mushroom clouds expanding twice over Japan, men in white sheets and pointy hats lynching black men out in rural areas across the South, four little girls bombed during Sunday School a few blocks from here. Now in this new century 19 zealous thugs carried out, on 9/11, acts of unspeakable evil with box cutters and over 10,000 civilians and soldiers are dead.

“Deliver us from Evil,” we pray, and then from our prayers go on to work for peace and reconciliation with one another, our neighbor, the stranger in our midst, and the child of God on the other side of the globe. We must trust even more, and follow ever more closely, this God who delivers, who leads, who protects, who suffers with us. As Pope John Paul 2 said before the United Nations General Assembly on October 5, 1995, words we need to heed after any 9/11,

“We must not be afraid of the future. We must not be afraid of mankind. It is no accident that we are here. Each and every human person has been created in the ‘image and likeness of the one who is the Original of all that is.’ We have within us the capacities for wisdom and virtue. With these gifts and with the help of God’s grace we can build on the next century and the next millennium a civilization worthy of freedom. We can and must do so! And in doing so, we shall see the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit.”^{iv}

It is not too late!

War, violence, destruction, we cannot acquiesce to these as our end. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, these are gifts of God’s Spirit. Let us open ourselves to these through the grace God offers and follow in his way through the sea to the promised land, through the cross to the resurrection. Let us refuse to be pulled down by those who would be our enemies, but resisting them, and finally forgiving them, let us rise to be a new generation of hope. For our God is able. The cloud, the fire, the cross, live by these signs and you can do all things through him who strengthens us.

Amen.

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Cross and Remembrance of the Dead” – A Sermon preached Feb. 21, 1932 for Day of National Mourning, Berlin, Germany, commemorating those who died in World War I

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians, 1:22-24, 18

ⁱⁱⁱ Ted Wardlaw, “Christian Century”, 9-6-11, p.18

^{iv} Frank Harrington, First Comes Faith, quoting Pope John Paul 2 in his Address to the United Nations General Assembly, October 5, 1995