

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COBLESKILL NY

September 11, 2011 – SERVICE OF 9/11 REMEMBRANCE

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker, FHC

Homily: “*Victory in Jesus!*”

Wisdom 3:1-6, 9	(The souls of the righteous are in the Hand of God)
Psalms 46	(God is our refuge and strength; we shall not fear)
Revelation 7:9-17	(God will wipe away every tear)
St. John 11:17-27	(Christ is the resurrection and the Life)

How could it have happened? Why didn't our defense and intelligence forces protect us? Who did this? Are we still in danger? Is this the start of World War III? As a stunned, angry, confused, and grieving nation cried out so many unanswerable questions on September 11th 2001, perhaps the query uppermost in the minds of many was, “Where was God when the towers fell?”

Before that Tuesday morning—a day that had dawned extraordinarily clear and beautiful—whatever we were complaining about, whatever we thought our priorities were, whatever our perception of peace and security was—all of these evaporated the moment we heard and saw the news of our country being attacked without warning or cause. In the decade since then, we have each required differing amounts of time and effort to come to terms with our feelings of defenselessness and vulnerability, hatred and revenge, sickened sorrow, and fears that may never quite subside.

As I personally struggled to deal with the mass death and destruction that shook our world on 9/11, I looked to the Bible for answers, comfort, and hope.

There, I found that for many thousands of years, God's people have faced enemies, persecution, exile, and war. And just possibly, that is why, in His last hour of sustained prayer on earth, Jesus prayed for His followers: “Holy Father, protect them in your name ... I am not asking You to take them out of the world, but I ask You to protect them from the evil one.” But who is the “evil one”?

Christian author Dr. Charles Stanley writes* : “It would be wrong for us to assume or give credit to Satan for everything that goes wrong in our lives. Certainly, the last thing we need to do as believers is to constantly focus our spiritual eyes on the enemy or his tactics.” If that is so, what is our alternative? When we read the Bible stories of Joshua, Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel, we see these heroes had something in common: Each faced seemingly impossible situations, yet they refused to dwell on the devil's attempt to ruin their lives. Each of these faithful servants of God turned to Him, and in His time, God brought about their deliverance.

Dr. Stanley continues: “While we do have a real enemy who seeks our destruction, we are not defenseless. We have the strength and the energy given to us by Christ Himself.” Nothing is stronger than this. It is the same resurrection power with which God raised Jesus from the grave. And it is ours, too, if only we would ask God for it.

If we have any hope at all, it is that Christ has already overcome the deepest, darkest, strongest evil that Satan, or those under his influence, can muster. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus broke the ultimate power of sin and put an end to eternal death.

But where was God on 9/11? I'll tell you. He was holding the hands of all those in the smoke-darkened stairways of Tower 2, and those who were trying to rescue them. He was on the streets of Manhattan, running alongside men and women covered with dust and screaming in terror. He sat in living rooms across America with loved ones waiting to hear good or bad news. God was in the shattered halls of the Pentagon as it burned, and shared a seat on United Flight 93. For, as we are reminded in Romans 8:38-39, there is no tribulation or distress, persecution, peril or sword—*nothing in life or death*—that can separate us from Christ and His love.

Because of God's great mercy toward us, we belong to Jesus, who has already won for us the victory by dying on the Cross for every sin and evil ever committed. On the other hand, the apostle Peter cautions us in 1 Peter 5:8-9 to "be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith . . ."

"You may well ask, 'If Jesus Christ has won the victory, then why are we still in the battle?'"

I had a seminary professor whose answer was, "Because, the devil is too stupid to realize he's been defeated." In other words, we live according to God's timetable. "The Lord alone knows the exact moment of [evil's] final defeat," but it WILL happen, for God is a God of justice. Meanwhile, victory over adversity can be ours daily, if we cling to Jesus Christ, as He prayed that we would.

Ten years ago, a respected Christian commentator suggested that on September 11th, just possibly God momentarily turned His back on us and lifted His protection from us, because as a nation we had turned our back on God and offended Him. This commentator acknowledged that his message was not a popular one. Still, it's one we might want to think about. While I do not believe God punished America on 9/11, the Bible does show us that God sometimes allows catastrophes in order to return His people to a closer relationship with Him.

Where was God on 9/11? He was behind the firemen's helmets, the police badges, and the chaplain's collars. He was holding an IV-bag and an oxygen mask. For God is near to the heart of all who, in the face of tragedy love, their neighbor and turn to God in repentance—those who, in the ashes of 9/11 looked to the Lord, not for all the answers because those we will not get, but because such tragedies teach us that we are mortal and can depend *only* upon God.**

When we realize that God understands what we're facing, and believe that He is willing to provide the strength and courage we need, trusting Him with even the smallest details of our lives becomes a natural part of our existence. Even when the world seems to be falling apart around us, as it did on 9/11/2001—and more recently, in Schoharie County following Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee.

In this community, we are now facing a kind of despair and devastation that emotionally rivals the disaster of 9/11. For many, things may seem helpless and hopeless. But God has given us what it takes to survive and flourish. He will fight our battles for us, when we join with and depend on Jesus Christ. In His final prayer on earth, Our Lord prays in John 17 that we will "all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you." Earlier, in John 15, Jesus said to His disciples, "Abide in me as I abide in you. ... I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because *apart from me you can do nothing.*"

Again and again, Jesus emphasizes the critical importance of staying close to Him—of being so closely identified with Christ that we are daily following His way, obeying His commandments, leaning on His strength, learning from His wisdom, taking our concerns to Him in prayer, and worshipping and praising Him.

Satan and those under his influence will try to discourage us by filling our minds with doubts, confusion, lies, and fear. But we don't have to believe these! Rather, we are to trust in the truth of the Gospel, which Christ has given us as a sure authority and a deep and lasting source of comfort and peace.

We are to stand firm in our faith, a faith that is not like the so-called "faith" of those who attacked our nation. Because reckless disregard for life, pride, arrogance, and malice are the enemies of true faith. James 4:6 states: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

We don't need box cutters. For God has given us a far stronger defensive weapon. St. Paul describes for us the Armor of God in Ephesians 6:14-17, which Bible scholar Eugene Peterson's translates as: "Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an *indispensable* weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirit's up so that no one falls behind or drops out."

"Make a habit of claiming the armor of God each morning before you leave the house, submitting your life to the Lord as your final authority. Acknowledging our need for Him is not a sign of weakness, but of unshakeable trust. When you place your faith in Jesus Christ, heaven is at your side."

And so, in the days ahead, let us pray to be one with Christ, earnestly asking our Heavenly Father to equip us with the hope, faith, strength, and courage that God alone can provide.

In closing, we ask that God's mercy be upon all who perished on 9-11, that light perpetual shine upon them, and rest eternal be theirs.

Amen.

* Dr. Charles Stanley, "The Armor of God," *In Touch* magazine, October 2001, pages 7-9.

** Adapted from Rev. Brett Blair & Rev. Brent Porterfield, ChristianGlobe Network via www.eSermons.com, 2001.