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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 12, 2021

Year B, Proper 19, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)

[Psalm 116:1-8](#)

[James 3:1-12](#)

[Mark 8:27-38](#)

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It was twenty years ago yesterday, what seemed like an ordinary Tuesday morning. For me the memories are of my college roommate telling me of what seemed an airplane accident at the South Tower of the World Trade Center before I left for class, only to learn about the crash at the North Tower when I arrived and found class canceled. Huddling with classmates in a dormitory lounge watching in shock as the towers collapsed. Calls to family; an impromptu candlelight vigil. You may have similar memories, or very different ones. If you're more than about 25, you surely have memories of that day.

Three years later I found myself moving to New York to go to seminary. Many times I walked past the World Trade Center site, which at that time was an enormous construction zone. The pile of debris had finally been dismantled, but it take several more years for the transit center and office building and memorial complex that are there now. On the other side of a chain link fence, with flowers and messages and tributes woven through the links here and there, you could see pits and workers and heavy equipment.

And you also saw a cross. They called it the Ground Zero cross, two steel beams that had been found in the rubble. It's part of the September 11 museum now, but then it stood on a concrete pedestal at the edge of the site. That cross for many people became a silent symbol of God's presence in sorrow, even in the most horrific tragedy. And a symbol of the kind of connectedness and solidarity that so many people experienced in the days after September 11; a solidarity born in grief.

“Whoever wants to be my follower must take up their cross and follow me,” we heard Jesus say today. But what does it mean to take up the cross? Jesus says it means to deny yourself, to lose your life for the sake of the gospel. But sometimes people have taken up the cross in a different spirit. Back in the Middle Ages the Crusaders painted the cross on their shields as they set out to conquer the Holy Land from Islam. They picked up the cross in one hand and the sword in the other and set off to use violence in the name of Jesus, to try to fight with earthly weapons against those they believed were evil.

Three days after September 11, President George W. Bush spoke at a prayer service at Washington National Cathedral—the Episcopal cathedral of Washington, D.C. He spoke movingly about those who had died, their families and loved ones, and about the grief of a nation and the compassion of those pitching in to help. He quoted Paul's words that “neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth can separate us from God's love.” But he also spoke of vengeance.

He spoke in cosmic terms. “Our responsibility to history [as Americans],” he said, “is clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”¹

Answer the attacks we did. Twenty years later, though, it seems clear that we did not rid the world of evil. In the wake of September 11 this country launched wars in two countries, plus innumerable drone strikes, covert actions, and so on in other places. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost, most of them Iraqi and Afghan lives, but many American lives as well, many times more than the 3,000 souls killed on that horrible day in September 2001. We have seen our society changed: metal detectors and bollards proliferating, domestic surveillance, profiling of Muslims and people from the Middle East, the creation of a prison at Guantánamo to get around human rights and legal protections, the humiliation of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the use of torture in the name of American freedom.

There have also been other things. There has been bravery and self-sacrifice among American and Iraqi and Afghan soldiers and civilians. There has been kindness and friendship. There have been, in many cases, genuine and even heroic efforts to promote democracy and prosperity and freedom. I want to say too that although there is a strong strand of pacifism in the Christian tradition, there are also Christian traditions that say there is such a thing as just war, that there are times when it’s acceptable or even necessary to use limited force in self-defense or the defense of others.

¹ “Text: Bush remarks at prayer service,” *Washington Post* (Sept. 14, 2001), https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushtext_091401.html.

But from the vantage point of 2021, as we look back to the grief and connectedness and solidarity that so many felt in the moments after that devastating attack, we can also see how quickly that grief moved into vengeance, into the idea that America as the good guys could use its military might to somehow rid the world of evil, and we can see how that response based on power and vengeance has failed, and left its corrosive consequences on our society.

When Peter rightly identified Jesus as the Messiah, Peter had something very particular in mind. He had power in mind. Military power, force power. Power that would be used for good: to rid Israel of its Roman occupiers, to put a benevolent king Jesus on the throne, to usher in a golden age of faithfulness to God and prosperity for God's people. That's what Peter thought being the Messiah meant. But it turned out Jesus didn't come to rid the world of evil, at least not in that way, not by force. He came to win the world to friendship with God, and his way of opposing evil was to let it kill him. So when Jesus spoke of suffering and rejection and death Peter was stunned and he told Jesus off. "Get behind me, Satan!" said Jesus. In other words, stop tempting me to act the way the world does under Satan's influence. Get behind me, in other words, get out of my way and take up your position behind me as my disciple. Learn to walk in my path. Peter eventually would learn. And so have so many other disciples through the centuries, learning, little by little to put down vengeance and take up the cross of life.

The first recorded victim of the 9/11 attacks was Father Mychal Judge, a Franciscan priest who was a chaplain with the New York Fire Department.² He was struck by debris from the collapsing South Tower as he stood in the North Tower lobby praying for those who were dying, those being evacuated, and those trying to save them. He and his crew had raced into the towers as others raced away. He was a beloved chaplain, and more. He'd joined the Franciscans as a teenager, captivated by the idea of a vow of poverty and a life of service. During the AIDS crisis in the 1980s he'd been a founder of the St. Francis AIDS Ministry, cradling young dying gay men in his arms, anointing them and giving them communion. It wasn't widely known, but he too was a gay man, and he advocated continually for gay Catholics.

Mychal Judge had a particular prayer he'd written, that he prayed every day, and handed out to people on prayer cards. "Lord, take me where you want me to go. Let me meet who you want me to meet. Tell me what you want me to say. And keep me out of your way."

Keep me out of your way. It sounds a little like that line, "Get behind me." Keep me from getting in the way of what you're doing. Keep me from seeking the world's kind of power instead of yours. Keep me walking behind you in the way of the cross.

Lord, take us where you want us to go. Let us meet who you want us to meet. Tell us what you want us to say. And keep us out of your way. Amen.

² See Ruth Graham, "Could Father Mychal Judge Be the First Gay Saint?", *Slate* (September 11, 2017), <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/09/father-mychal-judge-was-a-9-11-hero-could-he-also-become-the-first-gay-saint.html>.